Christian faith has appeared to many an easy thing; nay, not a few even reckon it among the social virtues, as it were; and this they do because they have not made proof of it experimentally, and have never tasted of what efficacy it is. For it is not possible for any man to write well about it, or to understand well what is rightly written, who has not at some time tasted of its spirit, under the pressure of tribulation; while he who has tasted of it, even to a very small extent, can never write, speak, think, or hear about it sufficiently. For it is a living fountain, springing up into eternal life.
-MARTIN LUTHER

EVANGELICAL MYSTICISM

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Andrew Zawislanski

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All Scripture passages are from the King James Version unless otherwise specified.

Cover image: the triune Jehovah dwells in the very center of the tripartite believer, composed of spirit, soul and body.

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INTRODUCTION

"I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God."
(Eph 3:14-19)

This passage from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians reveals to us that the life of the Christian believer transcends the normal categories of human experience. To be a Christian is not simply to assent to certain mental propositions, nor to perform certain actions. Being a Christian is an internal matter; it fundamentally changes the "inner man", the most basic, intimate part of the self. As Christians, our psychology and our moment to moment experience of life are to be radically different from that of unbelievers. Christ is not only the object of our faith, but he dwells in our hearts by faith. The uncreated logos of God, who is himself very God, resides in the inmost part of the believer. The uncreated love, which is God himself (1 John 4:8), is our ground and foundation. Through our relationship with God, our mind is given the ability to know that which passes knowledge. Finally, lest we think that the language of St. Paul is hyperbole, we are told that the believer

is to be filled with all the fullness of God. God, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain (1 Kings 8:27), fills us with all his fullness. Having been changed by the new birth, Christians are to live, know, feel and be in a radically different way.

Given what is found in Ephesians 3 and in many other passages of Scripture, it is unfortunate and puzzling that many Christians are so averse to the concept of mysticism. By dismissing mysticism, these Christians ignore the Scriptural promises about the supernatural love and peace that we are to enjoy in this life. Let us not, however, think that mysticism is merely a means of personal comfort and enjoyment. Advancing in mystical prayer is a Scriptural expectation, and it is key to developing a strong faith that will stand firm in times of trouble. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the author criticizes those who "ought to be teachers" but instead are in need of remedial instruction in "the first principles of the oracles of God" (Heb 5:12). We further read,

"Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment." (Heb 6:1-2)

These basic Christian doctrines (repentance, faith, baptism, etc.) are taught to children and converts in their catechisms. These verses tell us that it is not proper for Christians to merely review the contents of their introductory catechisms their entire lives. Rather they are to "go on unto perfection". If

we fail to do this, we are like a grown man still needing his mother's milk. Furthermore, this perfection cannot be understood as merely developing an intellectual understanding of more complex Christian doctrines, for immediately following these verses, we come to the grave warning against apostasy (Heb 6:4-6). These two concepts are causally linked. We must go on unto perfection *in order that* we do not risk falling away. An advanced intellectual understanding of theological topics like the Trinity or Predestination does not prevent apostasy. Knowing from experience that Christ dwells in us is what will save us from apostasy during times of trial. A living perception of what is described in Ephesians 3 is what has sustained the martyrs throughout the centuries. If we do not enjoy this living perception, we must strive and pray until God grants it to us.

I offer this book as a concise, practical and Biblical guide to mystical prayer. Throughout I have relied on the great spiritual teachers of the Church and their experience of the Gospel. Although mysticism can be seen as the pinnacle of the mature Christian life, this does not mean that mystical prayer requires academic learning. The humility of the simple and the humility of the worldly wise meet in the same depth, and it is here that mystical experience begins. My hope is that this book will be easily understandable by all those who search the Scriptures with zeal. The remainder of this introduction seeks to define the term "mysticism" and to address certain anticipated objections from a confessional Lutheran perspective, and as such any reader uninterested in these more technical concerns can move on to the first chapter of the book.

* * *

The word "mysticism" derives from the Greek mysterion, which referred to the doctrines and practices of ancient initiatory cults. The translators of the Septuagint used the word to refer to secrets revealed by God: "there is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets (mysteria)"(Dan 2:28). The word is used throughout the New Testament in a similar sense. St. Paul refers to the preaching of the Gospel as the "revelation of the mystery (mysterion), which was kept secret since the world began"(Rom 16:25). Elsewhere St. Paul speaks of ministers as "stewards of the mysteries of God"(1 Cor 4:1). The Latin Vulgate sometimes translates mysterion as "mysterium", and sometimes as "sacramentum." To this day, the Greek Church refers to her sacraments as the "holy mysteries." While all supernatural religion is mystical/mysterious in the sense that it reveals something unknowable by ordinary means, over the centuries "mysticism" or "mystical theology" came to refer more narrowly to the direct perception of the divine by the believer, often in a deep state of prayer during which normal sense perception and discursive thought are suspended. Maturing Christians are to develop an ever clearer awareness of God's presence in our lives, an awareness which surpasses human reason. Hence "mysticism" naturally suggests itself as an appropriate term for this process of Christian maturation.

As a Lutheran, I am aware that there are many of my own faith who will be repulsed by the suggestion that mysticism, as it is normally understood, is compatible with the pure teaching of the Gospel. Many Christians from other

traditional Protestant denominations will likewise be uneasy, given that mystical experience is more often associated with their theological opponents, such as Papists or charismatics. It is therefore necessary for me to define more exactly what I mean by mysticism, and to comment on the history of mystical prayer during the late medieval and early Protestant periods.

Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) was one of the most prominent Lutheran theologians of the 17th century. He strongly urged Christians to pursue a deeper spiritual life, and his work and writings had an enormous influence on subsequent generations. According to Spener, dogmatic theology and mystical theology (or mysticism) deal with "the same material but in different ways". Dogmatic theology gives an organized account of the truths revealed in Scripture in a way that can be understood by reason, while mysticism,

> "is not satisfied with mere knowledge. It takes the whole mind and all the powers of the soul into its realm and, in these, wishes to establish once again the divine image. It stresses practical purification, illumination and union with God." [1]

The dogmatician can teach the fact that all things work for the good of those who love God (Rom 8:28), but mysticism purifies the heart such that it is able to accept God's will peacefully even when his will sharply contradicts the desires of our flesh. When a Christian who neglects mysticism encounters adversity, he often simply "bites the bullet" psychologically, stoically bearing the discomfort by continually working up his reason to

1 Philipp Jakob Spener. *On Hindrances to Theological Studies*, in P*ietists: Selected Writings*. Paulist Press, 1983. Page 68.

focus on the dogmatic truths that should bring comfort. This falls short of the ideal as described by August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), that one should be able to "endure...evil willingly from the base of one's heart".[2] This can only be achieved when all of the powers of the soul, and above all the will, have been purified.

This concept of advancing from mere intellectual knowledge to the full consecration of the heart and will to God is found throughout Lutheran writers in the centuries following the Reformation. Johann Arndt (1555-1621) was perhaps the most popular and influential devotional writer in the entire history of the Lutheran Church. In Book III of his magnum opus *True Christianity*, Arndt provides instruction on how a Christian is to advance to the "last and most perfect state" of union with God. Arndt states that in order to achieve this state, a man "must devote and consecrate his whole heart and soul to God; that is, not only his understanding, but his will and affections also".[3] If we define mysticism as this progressive consecration of heart and will to God, it becomes evident that mysticism is not only consistent with the Gospel, but is in fact a requirement for all Christians. The first and greatest commandment of our Lord is that we are to love God with all our heart. This certainly cannot be done as long as any part of our heart is still given over to worldly lust. Mysticism can thus be seen as striving through prayer to obey this commandment.

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2 August Hermann Francke. *Following Christ*, in *Pietists: Selected Writings*. Paulist Press, 1983. Page 138.

3 Johann Arndt. *True Christianity*. The Lutheran Book Store, Philadelphia, 1868. Page 375.

In promoting this form of mysticism, I am simply following the mainstream devotional piety of the golden age of Lutheran theology.

Unfortunately, to many of today's confessional Lutherans, the names of Arndt, Spener and Francke will be just as offensive as the term "mysticism". These men and their numerous followers are today dismissed as "pietists". Confessional Lutherans tend to view the term "pietist" as so disgraceful, that simply labeling a man as a "pietist" is expected to end any debate about the merits of his teaching, without any careful Scriptural testing of the actual teaching in question. The term "pietist" is also given an excessively broad scope, encompassing both sober, orthodox Lutherans like Spener and more radical figures like Count Zinzendorf (1700-1760).[4] This easy dismissal of anyone stained by the accusation of "pietism" distorts Lutheran history and has led to the impoverishment of contemporary Lutheran spirituality. While Spener and other "pietists" certainly had their detractors in their day, they also had many supporters in the Church. For example, Abraham Calov (1612-1686) is often seen as one of the most rigid and precise Lutheran dogmaticians, and yet Spener refers to him as his "especially honored patron".[5] Even someone as late as Wilhelm Loehe (1808-1872), often celebrated as the great champion of confessional orthodoxy, encouraged a prayer life that would make many contemporary

4 For an examination of the extreme aberrations that arose in Zinzendorf's movement, see Paul Peucker. *A Time of Sifting.* Penn State University Press, 2015.

5 Philipp Jakob Spener. *Pia Desideria*. Fortress Press, 1964. Page 105.

Lutherans uncomfortable. Loehe wrote that pastors should be "eager to use the manifold ascetic literature of the Lutheran Church"[6] which books are "lovely gardens of paradise, full of tall trees and beautiful, fair-smelling flowers, full of precious fruit and fresh springs".[7] Loehe also endorsed a step-by-step process of mystical prayer called "the ladder of devotion", which culminates in the "heart's devotion...the peaceful, blessed work of [the] inner Sabbath".[8] Thus we can see that it is incorrect to think that the "orthodox" and "confessional" disdain for "pietism" as it exists today can be directly applied to previous centuries. I certainly share Loehe's opinion that we should enrich our spiritual lives with the "manifold ascetic literature" of our Lutheran tradition, but this cannot happen until we reassess our conception of "pietism".

Having defended the devotional practices of those dismissed as "pietists", one might wonder why I have settled on the term "mysticism" rather than "pietism" for the title of this book. Pietism generally refers only to teachers who lived after the Reformation, while mysticism can refer to the prayer life of the Church throughout all ages, from the time of the Old Testament up until today. As Lutherans, we advocate reform only in those areas that need reform, and in all other areas we maintain doctrinal and devotional continuity with the pre-Reformation Church. Thus mysticism is not only Biblical and in line with our confessional identity, but it is also one of the key

6 J. K. Wilhelm Loehe. *The Pastor*. Concordia Publishing House, 2015. Kindle edition, page 1544.

7 Ibid., page 1553.

8 Ibid., page 1612.

areas in which Lutherans maintained the practices of the medieval Church. It is well known that Luther himself drew inspiration from certain of the medieval mystics, especially the anonymous author of the 14th century *Theologia Germanica.*[9] The *Theologia Germanica* and works by similar authors were studied and reprinted by Lutherans for centuries after the Reformation. For example, Arndt cites Johann Tauler (1300-1361) as his main influence in mystical theology. This is not to say, of course, that the writings of these medieval mystics were free from error. But as in all other areas, Lutherans used the Scriptures to purify what they had received from previous generations of Christians. Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession affirms that we have retained the Mass (Divine Service) of the historic Church, with only necessary changes being made to remove certain errors and superstitions. Likewise our dogmaticians have always freely made use of patristic and medieval theologians, accepting their true teaching while rejecting the false. In Luther's day and during several subsequent generations, there was also a continuity in mystical prayer, a continuity which has been almost completely broken by more recent generations of Lutherans. This rupture is such that while contemporary confessional Lutherans are solid on issues of dogma, their daily psychological experience is heavily dominated by post-Enlightenment rationalism. God's revelation must not only inform what we think and feel, but how we think and feel.

9 For a more detailed account of Luther's relationship with medieval mysticism, see Bengt R. Hoffman. *Theology of the Heart.* Kirk House Publishers, 1998.

Even if we can demonstrate that the medieval approach to mystical prayer was retained in early Lutheran piety, many Lutherans will still feel that this type of prayer is more properly a Papist practice.

In approaching this particular aspect of the question, we must first make a distinction between mystical and visionary experience. Mysticism involves receiving an ever clearer impression of the truths of Scripture upon our hearts and minds, while visions impart novel sense perceptions. The Papists have relied upon visions as evidence for unscriptural ideas such as purgatory and Mariolatry. Lutherans are correct in condemning this use of visions, but it does not follow that we must therefore totally condemn all forms of religious experience that transcend normal psychological states. Every part of true religion has its counterfeit. There is false theology, false soteriology, false ecclesiology, false worship, and false supernatural experience. These parts of religion must be reformed according to Scripture, but in no case should we reject anything simply because it has been abused. Papist doctrines can be based on both false religious experience and false Scriptural exegesis. We would never conclude that we must therefore abandon Scriptural exegesis, and it would be no more reasonable to conclude that we must abandon all transcendent religious experience.

Second, there is a strong case to be made for mysticism actually being more naturally suited to Protestantism. In defending their position, Papists frequently appeal to the antiquity and continuity of their bureaucracy, claiming that one can be in communion with God only within their hierarchy and

ritual. Against this Papist view, Protestants affirm that we know Christ directly without any intermediary institution, and that "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth"(John 4:24). Lutheran pastor and mystical writer Valentin Weigel (1533-1588) says that those who think that true religion is tied to a particular place or external set of practices lack the true knowledge of Christ, viz. that he dwells within the believer:

"If only one knows the saying of Christ and has faith in it, that, as Christ says to the Pharisees, the kingdom of God does not stand here or there in external demeanors but is rather inside within you, one would then be sufficiently convinced that neither place, ceremonies, nor other external things make us blessed but rather only the true faith in the spirit."[10]

Anglican mystic William Law (1686-1761) makes a similar point, criticizing those who make arguments for Christianity based on reason and history, rather than relying on the direct knowledge of Christ in the Gospel.

"He that adheres only to the History of the Facts, Doctrines, and Institutions of the Gospel, without being born of its Spirit, is only such a Christian, and is no nearer to Christ, than the Jew, who carnally adhered to the Letter of the Law. They both stand in the same distance from Gospel Christianity. It is vain therefore for the modern Christian, to appeal to Antiquity, to History, and ancient Churches, to prove that he belongs to Christ; for he can only belong to him, by having the Power of Christ, and the Spirit of God living and dwelling in his renewed inward man. But a learned Christianity, supported and governed by Reason, Dispute, and Criticism, that is forced to

10 Valentin Weigel. *On the Place of the World*, in *Valentin Weigel: Selected Spiritual Writings*. Paulist Press, 2003. Page 140.

appeal to Canons, and Councils, and ancient Usages, to defend itself, has lost its Place, stands upon a fictitious Ground, and shows, that it cannot appeal to itself, to its own Works, which alone are the certain and only Proofs, either of a true, or a false Christianity."[11]

The fundamental premise of mysticism is that God reveals himself directly to the believer, and that this revelation changes the believer in the deepest part of his soul. This is essentially the same as the Protestant insistence that each individual believer is born again by his personal faith in Christ. Our assurance comes from this direct knowledge of Christ, while the Papists insist on building their assurance on the opinions of men, human traditions and a worldly hierarchy.

Another possible Lutheran concern about mysticism is that the focus on personal experience could lead to a synergistic understanding of salvation. This concern is best addressed by observing that the late medieval mysticism that influenced Lutheranism strongly emphasized the mortification of self-will and self-love. These mystics understood that our self-will is only capable of evil, and that in order to please God we must cease from our own willing and live only according to his will. This denial of self-will is central to the mystical understanding of man's communion with God. When speaking of dying to oneself and living to God, Tauler says,

"To this state a man cannot attain except he unite his will with God, with an entire renunciation and perfect denial of himself, and all selfish love of himself; and all delight in having his own

11 William Law. T*he Way to Divine Knowledge*, in *The Works of the Reverend William Law, Volume VII*. G. Moreton, 1893. Page 183.

will be over-mastered and quenched by the shedding abroad in his heart of the Holy Spirit in the love of God, so that it seem as though the Holy Spirit Himself were the man's will and love, and he were nothing and willed nothing on his own account."[12]

Similarly the author of the *Theologia Germanica*, when speaking about God cleansing us from sin, writes,

"in this bringing back and healing, I can, or may, or shall do nothing of myself, but just simply yield to God, so that He alone may do all things in me and work, and I may suffer Him and all His work and His divine will."[13]

Far from leaning towards a synergistic understanding of salvation, these passages are reminiscent of Luther's great theological insight: salvation by faith alone. Luther was aware of this teaching in the medieval mystics and noted that according to Tauler "salvation is through resignation of one's will in all things".[14]

The denial of self-will is an essential feature of salvation by faith, for it is self-will that causes a sinner to seek to justify and exalt himself. We are saved when, through grace, we cease to trust in our own efforts and righteousness, and trust instead in Christ. Mysticism is therefore not a foreign practice that must be unnaturally grafted onto the Evangelical faith. Properly understood, Christian mysticism and the Evangelical faith cannot exist apart from each other. Luther's doctrinal

12 Johann Tauler. *Sermon for St. Stephen's Day*, in *The History and Life of the Reverend Doctor John Tauler of Strasbourg; with Twenty-Five of his Sermons*. Eaton & Mains, 1907. Page 406.

13 Anonymous. *Theologia Germanica*. Scriptoria Books, 2014. Page 5.

14 Bengt R. Hoffman. *Theology of the Hear*t. Kirk House Publishers, 1998. Page 82.

insights could even be seen as the culmination of mysticism in Northern Europe. The mystics had long taught that being reconciled to God involves a direct encounter with the divine and the denial of all dependence on works and self-righteousness. Luther gave a solid Scriptural foundation for these doctrines, overthrowing the antichrist claim that the way to God lies in human hierarchies and self-righteousness. For several generations following the Reformation, Lutheran devotional writers understood that this principle of self-denial must be applied to all of Christian life. These Lutheran mystics sought to teach their readers how to use the Scriptures to root out all lingering vestiges of self-will. This pursuit of holiness in no way threatened the Lutheran doctrines of grace, for the pursuit was itself purely monergistic: we become holy only to the extent that we cease from self-will and God comes to work and will in us.

A Note on the Sources

Throughout this book I cite various Christian teachers. While mystical experience has been known throughout Church history, I have focused mainly on teachers from late medieval Northern Europe and the early centuries of Lutheranism. By citing an author I do not mean to imply that I uncritically endorse that author's entire system. Just as we sift from the ancient fathers and medieval theologians, so we should feel free to sift from the mystics, even those whose metaphysical speculations have sometimes strayed from the straightforward reading of Scripture.

1. SOME CAUTIONS

In the Introduction I indicated that Christians seeking greater maturity ought to pursue mystical prayer. Here I caution that only Christians who are already firmly established in the faith should do so. A firmly established Christian is one who is well read in the Scriptures, is utterly convinced of his theological position, and is free from gross habitual sin. A thorough knowledge of the Scriptures is indispensable for guiding and protecting the Christian during mystical prayer. Someone who is wavering in his belief or who frequently loses in his struggle against sin is indeed in need of the milk of the first principles of the Gospel and is not ready for the meat of the Christian life. Pursuing mystical prayer while in this unsettled state could potentially lead to negative consequences.

My second caution is that all Christians engaged in mystical prayer ought to exercise discernment and test all things according to the Scriptures. Satan and his angels always attempt to subvert any godly endeavor. Throughout her history the Church has been assaulted by countless false doctrines. These false doctrines have been met and overcome by the clear teaching of Scripture. Likewise in mystical prayer, it is possible that one will encounter temptations from the enemy, and these must also be countered by Scripture. Spiritual pride is one of the most likely temptations. Any experience encountered in prayer that leads to pride is against God's revealed will and must be rejected. Like Christ in the

wilderness, we must be able to meet any temptation with appropriate verses from the Bible, such as "When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom"(Prov 11:2). Satan might also attempt to introduce heretical ideas, perhaps accompanied by audio-visual hallucinations. Any audio-visual content is immediately suspect and should be pushed aside. Scripture is our only source for doctrine, and mystical prayer should never introduce any new doctrines.

However, that does not mean that we cannot gain new insights. During mystical prayer Scriptural doctrines can be made more vivid to us, and we can come to perceive applications of Scriptural truths to our personal circumstances. As Luther described it, in deep prayer we allow "rationally formulated thoughts" to fade away, as we sit in silence and let the Holy Spirit preach to us.[15]

Finally, I once again stress the practical nature of this book. Throughout the book I give specific practical advice, such as "Bring yourself into the inner Sabbath and consider your own sin". In order to gain the benefits of mystical prayer, this advice must be put into practice. I include similar, repetitive advice throughout. This repetition is deliberate, and the advice ought to be followed even when it is repetitive. Thus this book must be read with patience. Without patience, you will not bear fruit.

15 Quoted in Bengt R. Hoffman. *Theology of the Hear*t. Kirk House Publishers, 1998. Page 40.

2. THE SABBATH REST

"Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still."
(Ps 4:4)

"When thou wouldst pray, enter thy closet and close the door (Matt. vi. 6). Thy heart is that closet, into which thou shouldst enter if thou wouldst rightly pray. Thou must close the door that the distracting thoughts of worldly affairs enter not in to disturb thee...Christ prayed on a mountain (Luke vi. 12), and lifted up His eyes to heaven (John xvii. 1), and so ought we to turn our minds away from all creatures and direct them to God. Thou doest God an injury if thou prayest Him to have regard to thee when thou hast none to thyself."[16]

The Christian life requires action. We are to bring forth fruit, obeying God's commandments and showing love to our neighbor. We are also expected to spend time away from the world, entering our closet in order to pray in solitude. Whether working in the world or engaging in prayer, we must constantly fight the battle of the mind, taking every thought captive to Christ. It is easier to control our thoughts when in prayer than when we are engaged in external activity, as action in the world involves many distractions and temptations. It is therefore in the solitude of prayer that we must train our hearts and minds. We are to approach God without distraction, and when in his presence we can make great progress in the

16 Johann Gerhard. *Sacred Meditations*. Lutheran Publication Society, 1896. Page 141.

battle of the mind. When the mind is mastered in solitary prayer, we can then begin to make progress in guarding our mind from temptation when acting in the world.

Some mystical writers have described this solitary approach to God as entering into the Sabbath rest. The Old Testament Sabbath observance pointed to the eternal rest that we shall enjoy with our Lord, and it is through this approach to God in mystical prayer that we have the clearest foretaste of the peace that awaits us.

In order to pursue this Sabbath rest, we must understand the inner structure of man. All Christians know that man is made up of both a physical and a spiritual aspect. This spiritual aspect is often understood to include everything internal about man, such as his mind, emotions, will, etc. Let us attempt to divide these internal aspects of man more carefully.[17]

When we receive Christ by faith, we are immediately saved. There is no intermediate state in which a man is partly saved and partly unsaved. Salvation is not gained by the formation of an intellectual opinion, but by the new birth. Our salvation is described as being born of the Spirit, being given a new heart, or putting on the new man. The most fundamental part of us has been remade. It is in this most fundamental part of the self that God himself dwells, making the believer a temple of his Holy Spirit. This most fundamental part of ourselves is often referred to as the "heart" or the "spirit", and

17 In this division of the soul I closely follow the teaching of Valentin Weigel. See *The Golden Grasp*, in *Valentin Weigel: Selected Spiritual Writings*. Paulist Press, 2003.

these are the terms that I use in this book.[18] By "heart" I do not mean, of course, the physical organ, but the moral center of a man, following the teaching of Jesus that the heart is the origin of our good or evil actions (Matt 12:35).

While God dwells in the heart of the believer and our salvation is an accomplished fact, there are still many mental and emotional parts of us that are partly under the control of evil. This is why we must fight to make our thoughts captive to Christ. And while this battle to control our thoughts is fought in our mind or reason, this battle is not fought by our own reason, but by the power of God. St. Paul writes,

"my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." (1 Cor 2:4-5)

Further he writes,

"Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." (1 Cor 2:9-10)

We think rightly about God when the wisdom of God is revealed to us; we do not work our way up to God by using our own human reason. Reasoned arguments can be of use in apologetics, especially when demonstrating the contradictions in non-Christian belief systems, but these arguments must not

18 See Appendix C for Martin Luther's teaching on the spirit as the center of the human being and the dwelling place of God's wisdom.

be the foundation of our faith, lest our faith be established in the faulty wisdom of men. The power of God that comes through the preaching of the Gospel is poured into the heart and gives us new life. Someone who is dead in his sins cannot be made alive by convincing his reason of the truth of the Bible.

Reason, therefore, operates on a lower plane than the spirit/heart. Reason is our ability to analyze and draw conclusions from the data that exists in the mind. It is a great blessing when used rightly, and it is essential for us in carrying out our callings in this life. However, we must understand that it is not the ground of truth. For modern western man, human reason is the great idol. Even many Christians are still hindered by the wounds caused by this idol. Mystical prayer is the means by which one can find healing for these wounds.

Memory is the ability of the mind to recall data that was originally received through sense perception, as well as emotional states and conclusions that have been drawn by our reasoning faculty. Sense perception is the bridge between the inner and outer man, the means by which physical objects come to be known in the mind.

The inner life of man can thus be pictured as consisting of these four parts: heart, reason, memory and sense perception. God designed the four parts to operate in an orderly and hierarchical manner, but for fallen man, these parts are in a state of perversion. God desires that our hearts be turned wholly to him and become his dwelling place; that our reason be sanctified by obeying the commandments of the one who dwells in our heart; that our memory be directed by our

sanctified reason to focus on good and wholesome things; and that our sensual faculties avoid all unlawful pleasures. In fallen man, this proper order has been disrupted. Unrestrained sensual desire becomes the desire of the heart. Reason is employed to obtain this desire and to justify man's sinful course of action. In the Christian, the heart has been made new, but perfect order in the inner man has not been achieved. We often fail in following the Lord's commandment to love him with all our heart. The flesh rebels against God's law, and the reason frequently occupies itself with vain thoughts. Thus although we have been born of the Spirit, our inner life too much resembles that of the unbeliever, and we are left without the peace that Christ has promised us.

In order to gain the proper inner orientation, we must strive in prayer to undo this perversion. This is done by silencing all outer and inner distractions and listening to the witness of the Spirit in our own hearts. When entering into prayer, man is naturally inclined to seek a quiet place and to close his eyes. This is certainly a necessary first step when seeking the Sabbath rest, and it must be followed by an inner silence and darkness. We must disengage the heart from sense perception. We must ignore any mental images produced by the memory. We must cause our reason to be still. Only then can we stand in awe of God's presence and commune in stillness with our own hearts, the place where God has made his abode.

This Sabbath stillness is very foreign to the experience of many Christians today, and it is often difficult to achieve. We are so accustomed to moving constantly from one thought to

another, that we perceive our true selves to be this very succession of vain thoughts. When in this state of shifting disorder, we are unable to recognize the actual ground of the self. The true inner ground is the heart where Christ dwells by faith. It is from the heart that we are to forgive and love. We love God with our whole heart when this inner ground is sanctified and stilled, and we love others in a godly way when the love proceeds from this sanctified ground. This cannot be done when the heart is more accustomed to dwelling in the tumult of our thoughts than in the Sabbath of God.

The constant, often manic activity of the reason leads to the heart being passively driven about by our thoughts. This is a perversion of the proper order, for the highest part of man should direct the lower parts. Forcing the reason to be still for a time is a necessary means of training our reason in proper obedience. When teaching our children how to behave properly, we require that they be able to sit in silence patiently for a given period. This patient stillness is good in itself, and it also leads to better, more orderly behavior when the child does speak and move. We should expect no less from our own reason.

When the heart submits to God and is given the strength to subdue reason, memory and sense perception, then we can begin to perceive what we really are: a spirit who is to commune with God in his gracious Sabbath. This is the starting point of mystical prayer: enter into a quiet place and bring your body into stillness, detach your heart from any sense perception, ignore any images presented by the memory, stop the reason from drawing conclusions and making suggestions,

and keep your heart still while resting in God. When the heart is focused entirely on God, then you can ask him for wisdom without any wavering.

Every subsequent step presented in this book involves entering into the Sabbath rest. We are first to enter into God's presence in this way, and then proceed to the contemplation of his revelation.

3. THE MYSTERY OF THE SCRIPTURES

"Thy word hath quickened me."
(Ps 119:50)

"Cease but from thine own Activity, steadfastly fixing thine Eye upon one Point, and with a strong Purpose relying upon the promised Grace of God in Christ, to bring thee out of thy Darkness into His Marvelous Light. For this End gather in all thy Thoughts, and by Faith press into the Center, laying hold upon the Word of God, which is infallible, and which hath called thee."[19]

Christian opponents of mysticism will likely criticize the foundational instruction given in the previous chapter. They will claim that stilling the mind and seeking God within ourselves is perilously close to the teachings of various pagan religions. They will also suggest that mystical prayer draws one away from the Scriptures as the one source of infallible authority. These objections are made from pure and worthy motives. I too desire the expulsion of all pagan elements from the Evangelical faith, and I pray that the Scriptures be seen everywhere as the one unalterable standard of truth and conduct. That is why the mystical prayer that I advocate relies entirely on the word of God as the means by which the Holy Spirit dwells in us and instructs us.

19 Jacob Boehme. *Dialogues on the Supersensual Life*. Methuen and Company, London, 1901. Page 57.

Only Christians are able to seek God within themselves, because only we have been made a new creation by his grace; and this new birth comes through the preaching of the Word. The Bible teaches that God dwells in those who have been born again, and that his Holy Spirit bears witness to us. We therefore must affirm that we can know God's presence within us.

"...when thy heart weeps in thy body, because it feels itself surrounded by the darkness and horrors of death, destitute of all help and comfort, and infinitely far from all joy and delight—whither shall thy heart turn? Inwards to the Saviour, who has the keys of death and the grave, who died for thee and lives again, and eternally animates all things."[20]

We look inwards not because we rely on our own works or merits, but because Christ has chosen us as his dwelling place. God's choice was purely of grace, and therefore this looking inwards is a Gospel comfort to us. It does not puff us up, but humbles us; it inspires godly fear and trembling, as it reveals to us that the almighty Lord who created and sustains the universe lives within us.

However, when unregenerate man communes with his heart in silence, he does not come to know the true God. The original design of man included his heart, reason, imagination, etc. These aspects of man also exist in the fallen state, so unregenerate man is capable of stilling his reason in the way described in the previous chapter. But because his heart is totally corrupt and deceitful, anything found in such moments

20 Johannes Gossner. *The Heavenly Visitant*. William MacIntosh, London, 1865. Page 51.

of stillness is suspect. Just as pagans have false thoughts, false prayers and false moral codes, so they can have false mystical experiences when stilling the mind and centering the heart upon an idol. Therefore we do not accept that any spiritual insights can come from non-Christian forms of mysticism.

God himself is infinite, and yet he became a man in whom "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily"(Col 2:9). God is infinite, while the written words of the Bible are finite, at least in their outward form. God's Spirit is infinite, and yet this infinite Spirit is received by our finite spirit through the written or preached word. A thoroughly "Biblical Christianity" does not consist merely of finite dogmatic propositions deduced from the Scriptures. The Scriptures contain the very thoughts of the infinite God, and they are the means by which our corrupted nature is made new and our finite minds come into communion with the infinite.

In mystical prayer we do not seek to go beyond the teaching of Scripture, but rather to enter deeper into this teaching. We feed on and assimilate the teaching of Scripture. By his indwelling grace, God makes the thoughts that are communicated to us in Scripture our thoughts.

In our initial study of the Bible, our reason is usually very active. Even when the Holy Spirit uses this reading to plant a seed in good ground, the human reason is not fully crucified all at once. Our reason judges the Bible, it takes offense, it rationalizes and makes excuses. When reason is silenced, then God alone speaks to us as we read his word. One might even be bold enough to say that only in mystical prayer can the Bible truly be read. Our heart must not be

divided, partly clinging to Scripture and partly clinging to human reason. Therefore we must still our reason, gain control of our thoughts, and contemplate God's revealed word. This passive, faithful acceptance of revelation convinces the heart of the truths of Scripture in a way that rational study of the written words never can.

4. KNOWING THE UNCREATED

"Let us know, Let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord. His going forth is established as the morning; He will come to us like the rain, Like the latter and former rain to the earth."
(Hos 6:3, NKJV)

"A little bread sustains me, but it is through the blessing of God. A little medicine heals me, a fragrant flower refreshes me, but it is from the same cause. A dear friend comforts me; the comfort can continue only by the Divine blessing. Mine eye must, therefore, be directed to Him from whom cometh my help. The ungodly, who only look to the means, and not to God, make an idol of the means. As often as you take a piece of bread between your lips, and believe not that it is God who gives it the power of satisfying hunger, you make the bread your god. If you have bread, you have confidence, for your god still exists; if you are destitute of bread, you are confounded, because the god who fed you is no more."[21]

Bring yourself into the inner Sabbath and hear what the Lord says about himself. The Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures to give us knowledge of the uncreated. This knowledge is entirely different than other types of knowledge. God is not an object of knowledge that we can surround with our mind and view from all sides. "Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out"(Job 37:23). We can never set God apart from creation or from ourselves in order to consider him in isolation, for he is the one who created us to be capable of

21 Heinrich Mueller. *Hours of Spiritual Refreshment*. The Religious Tract Society, London, 1841. Pages 60-61.

knowledge (Job 35:10-11) and who gives us understanding (Job 38:36).

Knowing God through his revelation teaches us that the worldly way of knowing is flawed. More than that, the worldly way of knowing is idolatry. When we think that we "know" that fire burns and bread nourishes, rather than knowing that God causes fire to burn and bread to nourish, we make idols. Knowing God is not a matter of being consciously convinced of certain Biblical propositions; rather it is a constant perception in the heart that God is the one "in whom we live, and move, and have our being"(Acts 17:28). We are to pursue the knowledge of God, but we do not pursue it through deduction, moving from step to step with the power of our reason. We pursue the knowledge of God through God revealing himself to us as he suppresses and puts to death our vain thoughts. Our knowledge of God is beyond our control, just as the rising of the sun or the falling of the rain. As this pursuit of the knowledge of God advances, our inner vision begins to overcome our false thoughts, and God develops within us a heart-understanding of his Scriptural revelation. "[W]e must learn to maintain an inner solitude regardless of where we are or who we are with. We must learn to break through things and to grasp God in them."[22]

When entering into the stillness of prayer, you will gain clearer knowledge of your own thoughts. Thoughts that are true are not your own, they are the gift of God. False thoughts are idols, sinful distortions of what God has made and

22 Meister Eckhart. *The Talks of Instruction*, in *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings*. Penguin Books, 1994. Page 11.

revealed. The innermost thoughts of the believer exist only because of God's gracious power, for "in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom"(Ps 51:6).

Wisdom herself is uncreated and personal (Prov 8:22-23). Throughout the early chapters of the book of Proverbs, Wisdom is presented as a woman who loves and preaches to fallen men.

"She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors. Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the sons of man. O ye simple, understand wisdom: and, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart." (Prov 8:3-5)

It is through Wisdom that God created heaven and earth (Prov 3:19), and she is described as "a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her" (Prov 3:18). The Wisdom of Proverbs is the pre-incarnate Christ, the logos of God: "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:3-4). We are exhorted not only to have Wisdom or to follow Wisdom, but to love her and embrace her (Prov 4:6,8); we are promised that she will crown us with glory (Prov 4:9) and love us (Prov 8:17). The Wisdom that created the universe is in love with us, and she desires that we return this love. Our approach to Wisdom begins with fearing God (Prov 9:10), standing in awe of his majesty. It is with the heart, not the reason, that we fear, reverence and love others, and it is in the heart rather than in the reason that the divine Wisdom comes to us. "[W]isdom is accustomed willingly to lay her treasure in a

purified heart and to trust to it more and greater things than one could ever hope for."[23]

The call of Wisdom is the preaching of good news. God loves his Son, and we know God through the Son. Wisdom says that when God created the world,

"I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him, rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men." (Prov 8:30-31)

God delights in Wisdom, and Wisdom delights in the sons of men, and she desires that we delight in her. The promise of Wisdom is not simply the promise of gaining information, but of Christ pouring out his spirit upon us (Prov 1:23). By receiving Wisdom, our inner self is transformed and is given a new orientation. Wisdom enters into our heart and becomes a source of pleasure, not merely a teacher of our obligations (Prov 2:10). The heart of fallen man desires the things of this world, and seeks after material treasure above all else. A man who has been born of the Spirit has a heart that longs for the uncreated Wisdom; therefore the Christian reflexively searches for Wisdom as a fallen man searches for silver and hidden treasure (Prov 8:10-11). Rather than earthly dwellings or earthly food, the Christian delights in the house of Wisdom and the imperishable feast that is always offered to us, if we only receive her invitation in humility and obedience.

23 Gottfried Arnold. *The Mystery of the Divine Sophia*, in *Pietists: Selected Writings*. Paulist Press, 1983. Page 223.

"Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars: She hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table. She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city, Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled. Forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding." (Prov 9:1-6)

When we were saved through faith in Christ, we were given access to the house of Wisdom. We have been invited, and we have the right to enter and to feast with the Lord. Christians who do not strive to find their joy in these eternal gifts are in danger of being choked by the thorns of the world. When we have been so changed that the things of God become our delight, we are kept from spiritual danger.

In mystical prayer, we ask God to put to death the old man that still seeks his joy in the flesh. We ask that the fear of God be put in our hearts, and that we hunger and thirst for our incorruptible treasure. Our great treasure is the Lord himself, who has adopted us and espoused us to himself. We come to know the nature of our Father and Bridegroom through meditating on the revealed word. This is not the mere academic analysis of the divine attributes, but a heartfelt enjoyment of the qualities of our beloved. Dogmatic works of theology that systematize revealed truths about God have been of great benefit to the Church, but something is lost when these texts replace the Scriptural presentation of these same truths, which were originally given in hymns of praise and narratives of what God has done for his people.

The remainder of this chapter looks at Scripture passages that reveal the nature of the uncreated. In order to receive this revelation, I urge you again to enter into the inner Sabbath. By God's grace, draw yourself away from flesh and blood, and look to the bright face of the Lord that can purge us from sin. Once you have come into this stillness, consider each of these Scriptural truths with a mind free from distraction. Each of these truths is more than our finite minds can comprehend; how vain it is to think on them without devoting extensive time and our full concentration in order to receive them to the best of our ability! When received in this holy stillness, these truths kindle an ever-growing faith in the heart, which in turn imparts light and truth to our own thoughts and actions. Receiving revelation in this way will change not only what you know, but how you perceive things. You will be able to say with the psalmist, "Mine eyes are ever toward the Lord" (Ps 5:15), for the truth of God's mercy and power constrains us to see and consider him at all times.

God's Ineffability

"Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable." (Ps 145:3)

The Lord's greatness cannot be considered without eliciting praise from the heart of the believer. Do not consider the attributes of the Lord with the reason only, but with the heart. Repent of any vain handling of the name or nature of God that does not enter deeply into your being. When we are commanded to meditate upon God and to consider his ways,

we are given an infinite task; for God is ineffable and inscrutable; his greatness is unsearchable, that is, man can search without end and never exhaust God. When it comes to worldly knowledge, we make progress by searching out the limits of a particular object or concept; but when one seeks to know God, we gain this inestimable gift by submitting to the unsearchable Lord in silence and humility, saying with Job, "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth"(Job 40:4).

The Eternity of God

"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." (Ps 90:1-2)

We live in the world created by God, but even now God himself is our dwelling place. The created world will perish, but the God in whom we live, and move, and have our being is from everlasting to everlasting. The eternity of God is our hope and our home, and it is the place of the Sabbath rest. When our heart is directed towards created beings, we view reality from a finite and sequential perspective, our heart being attached to an uncertain outcome. This creates anxiety and weakens faith. We are told that with God, "That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been"(Eccl 3:15), and by entering into the eternity of God, this certainty becomes more and more our own. All Christians mentally assent to the proposition that the triumph of God over his enemies is an

accomplished fact, but they do not draw the full strength that can come from this conviction, because they live too much for things that are temporary.

The carnal mind desires to make the finite and the temporary primary, for it is in this twisted perspective that the carnal mind's pretensions to autonomy appear to be more plausible. When eternity is made primary in our mind, God's victory becomes nearer and more active in our souls.

The Omnipresence of God

"Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord." (Jer 23:24)

With physical objects, place is exclusive, as two objects cannot be in the exact same place. Our concept of place limits objects and divides them from each other; for example, we have a special longing for a loved one when he is separated from us by a great distance. When God is said to be far from us, this is only in a moral sense; we are separated from God when we live in rebellion against him, but in a physical sense he is never nearer or farther from us, for he fills all things. It is because God is everywhere that we cannot be separated from him by any creature, so long as our heart remains fixed upon him. God's omnipresence teaches us the folly of ever acting as if God were not with us, or ever thinking that God cannot hear our cry and respond by revealing himself and giving his consolation. When considering this attribute of God, we can begin to see how mystical prayer can be perpetual, even when

the mind is focused on an external task. For we are all subconsciously aware of the presence of another person. When we are in a room with another person, we will automatically carry ourselves and behave in a certain way. We maintain a certain decorum in public even when absorbed in the most complicated tasks. In the same way, by means of meditating on God's omnipresence, we can come to maintain a reflexive avoidance of carnal affections.

The Omnipotence of God

"Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places." (Ps 135:6)

Rebellious self-will is one of the chief impediments to communion with God. The way to combat this evil is examined in more detail later on, but here we can note that accepting God's omnipotence is a great help in this area. Self-will refuses to fear God, vainly assuming that it can operate outside of God's order.

"I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him." (Eccl 3:14)

Accepting God's omnipotence leads to the fear of God and the resignation of our own will to God's will. It also strengthens our faith in God's promises of victory and salvation. When we walk in the flesh, we inevitably focus our minds on worldly strength, and our awareness of the divine omnipotence begins to fade.

This makes the truth of God's promise of salvation less certain in our hearts, and carnal fear begins to take root. We must be trained by the Spirit to know and trust in God's almighty power.

The Omniscience of God

"O lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether...Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it." (Ps 139:1-4,6)

The pride of the mind is one of the great spiritual poisons. This pride sets limited human understanding against the omniscience of God. Meditating upon God's omniscience is therefore an important practice in our pursuit of humility.

In our fallen state we wrongly assume that our inner world is a private realm in which we are autonomous. This is because sin has cut us off from the direct perception of God for which we were created. The pride of the mind grows out of the illusion that the reason rules itself and is capable of passing righteous judgment by its own standards. In reality every thought and feeling within us is both seen and evaluated by God. He is not only all-knowing but all-judging.

"The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven: his eyes behold, his eyelids try, the children of men. The Lord trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth." (Ps 11:4-5)

All of our actions, words, and innermost sentiments are brought before the throne of the Almighty.

God Is Creator

"By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth." (Ps 33:6)

"The spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life." (Job 33:4)

The God who is the maker of heaven and earth has made each one of us. He is the living God, and unlike the dumb idols, he possesses breath (Jer 10:14). When we worship the author of life, we share in his life, but if we worship idols, we become partakers of their lifelessness (Ps 115:8).

Our innermost self and the most distant part of the universe share a loving creator who delights in order and beauty. He has made both the glory of the visible heavens and the eyes of man that perceive this glory. It is by God's gracious will that we have been made to excel the brute beasts in wisdom (Job 35:11) and are able to contemplate his attributes.

God is both creator and sustainer of life, and all life continuously depends on his good pleasure.

"If he set his heart upon man, if he gather unto himself his spirit and his breath; All flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust." (Job 34:14-15)

Throughout the Scriptures we are exhorted to praise God at all times, and this exhortation becomes easy to obey when the heart is fixed on the truth that God is the only sovereign creator of all that exists.

"Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves." (Ps 100:3)

God is Just and Merciful

"The Lord shall endure for ever: he hath prepared his throne for judgment." (Ps 9:7)

"The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him." (Ps 103:17)

We observed above that God's omniscience involves his evaluation or judgment of all human actions. This is a great comfort, for we know that no injustice will ever be ignored. God evaluates all actions as soon as they are performed, and in the end he will finally judge all injustice.

"I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there. I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work." (Eccl 3:16-17)

Our trust that vengeance belongs to the Lord lifts a weight of anxiety from our hearts. Our joy is no longer tied to an uncertain temporal outcome, but to the eternal certainty of the final judgment. When in the Sabbath rest before God, we must

dredge up and expose all anxiety we feel about injustice in the world, for this anxiety is a fruit of unbelief.

We are further comforted by the fact that our Lord who is perfectly just is also perfectly merciful. God's mercy towards the elect is another eternal certainty. Trusting in this everlasting mercy overwhelms and drowns all doubt and fear.

He belongs to Us and We Belong to Him

"Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee." (Ps 73:25)

"The Lord taketh pleasure in his people." (Ps 149:4)

We conclude this chapter by considering what is perhaps the most astonishing thing about God: he is *our* God, and we are *his* people. God is our inheritance and our treasure. We belong to him, and he belongs to us. We take pleasure in him, and he takes pleasure in us. All Christians possess God by faith, but many persist in grasping after created things, and thereby cut themselves off from the enjoyment of their treasure.

"[God] wishes to be our sole possession. This is what he wills and intends, and he strives for one thing only, that he can and may be this. Here lies his greatest bliss and delight. The more he can be this and the more completely, the greater is his bliss and joy, for the more we are in possession of other things, the less he is our possession. And the less love we have for all things, the more we possess him together with all that he can do for us. Therefore, when our Lord wished to speak of all the beatitudes, he put poverty of spirit at their head, and it came

first in order to show that all blessedness and perfection have their beginning wholly in poverty of spirit."[24]

God wants us to forsake all created things in order to have the uncreated as our possession. The divine essence cannot be conceived by the mind, but it can become ours. Knowing God has been described as "unknowing", because it is so different from any other type of knowledge. Likewise we can speak of possessing God as "unpossessing". God is more truly and eternally our possession than any created thing, and this possessing does not involve any sin or anxiety or limitation. When in the Sabbath rest before God, cast away all selfish, grasping claims your heart might have upon created things. Sell all that you have to purchase the one pearl of great price.

24 Meister Eckhart. *The Talks of Instruction*, in *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings*. Penguin Books, 1994. Page 47.

5. CONFESSION OF SIN

"I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest."
(Ps 51:3-4)

"'The Lord opens the eyes of the blind;' pray him to 'anoint thine eyes with eye-salve' (Rev 3:18), that is, to give you to see, clearly, how great your corruption is. Set apart a portion of time every day, to examine yourself, and pour out your soul in his presence. Dissipation and continued worldly occupation, are great obstacles to our salvation, because in such engagements, the soul is captive to, and engrossed by material objects. The continual noise of visible things impose silence upon the conscience; its motions, its admonitions, its remorse are not attended to. While this turmoil continues, the attractions of...grace have no hold upon the heart: the work of the Holy Spirit meets only with resistance; the good seed of the word of life is stifled; we forget God, and lose sight of the salvation of our souls."[25]

Bring yourself into the inner Sabbath and consider your own sin. Silence all worldly concerns and desires, and bring your sin before the infinite and righteous Lord.

All Christians have gained an awareness of their sin during conversion, catechesis, and private confession, and they ought to confess their sin daily during set times of prayer. But often the memory of the conviction of sin can become distant,

25 David Hollaz. *The Order of Evangelical Grace in the Economy of Salvation*. J. Eedes, London, 1838. Page 33.

and the daily confession of sin can become mechanical and lifeless. It becomes lifeless when the heart is too much concerned with material things and does not focus wholly on the words of confession as taught in the Scriptures, where we learn that the penitent sinner is to pour out his heart like water. Just as the carnal mind obscures the awareness of God's attributes, it also obscures the awareness of our own corruption.

This inattention to our own sinfulness can be an impediment to patiently resigning ourselves to the will of God; for a man who does not walk in a constant awareness of his own sinfulness will be more likely to complain in the face of affliction, rather than recognizing it as both a just recompense for sin and the refining fire of our Lord.

"What the fire is to the gold, and the polishing mill to the precious stone, that must I find in affliction. Affliction gives me light, that I may see God...The wind must separate the wheat from the chaff, and the cross the righteous from the wicked. The ungodly abide not under the cross; they are as the chaff which the wind driveth away. The corn falls at the feet of the winnower; the righteous fall under the cross before God, and submit to his will."[26]

We pray that we may see the Lord's refining hand beneath every physical pain and disease, in every insult and show of disrespect, in every loss of property or reputation, in every soured friendship, even in every evil spirit sent from the Lord (1 Sam 16:14); that we may break through and see God

26 Heinrich Mueller. *Hours of Spiritual Refreshment*. The Religious Tract Society, London, 1841. Pages 17-18.

everywhere. Let us, as the penitent thief (Luke 23:41), recognize that in our suffering we receive our due reward, and stand in awe of the fact that even this just punishment is itself a gift of life and light to those who have faith.

Mystical prayer can certainly bring much joy and peace, but that state is achieved through many years of thorough and sometimes painful repentance. Like Job, we must confess that the more intimately we know God, the more thoroughly we must abhor our sinfulness.

"I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6)

Through confessing our sins to God in holy stillness, we are taught that we daily fall into complacency and self-righteousness. The seething flesh and blood are still with us, beneath our best efforts, ready to flash into anger and spiritual adultery. We learn that our heart still has a tendency to be scattered over the idols of the mind, and struggles to obey gladly the voice of the Lord (Jer 3:13).

In our confession, we begin by bringing forth into the light all sins we are aware of. Knowing that even one sin can break our communion with God (Jas 2:10), we must persevere in our study of God's law, keeping his law "as the apple of thine eye"(Prov 7:2), that we might always be taught God's standard of righteousness. Further, we are to pray that God reveal to us other sins we may not even perceive, supplying the grace to expose the sins we cannot uncover when relying on our own strength.

"The soul ought to enter into a strict examination of itself, to sift every corner of its inward chambers, and to pray for a clearer light to view all subtle corruptions."[27]

Here we must exercise caution; we must know what we are asking for (Mark 10:38); we must recognize that the revelation of new sin can cause pain, as we are shown more of our failings. God can allow us to be tried and sifted (Luke 22:31-32), and the answer to this prayer of being shown one's sin may come in the form of inner and outer chastisement or affliction.

Through all this, let us remember that we must "despise not the chastening of the Lord, neither be weary of his correction"(Prov 3:11), and that we must pray that all sorrow we might feel over our sin or our affliction be made godly sorrow leading to salvation (2 Cor 7:10).

27 Thomas Bromley. *The Way to the Sabbath Rest*. J. Baker, London, 1710. Page 9. [spelling modernized by author]

6. THE WORK OF CHRIST

"I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."
(1 Cor 2:2)

"Blot out the entire world. The tablet of my thoughts
be wiped clean. Let nothing remain but Jesus Christ.
I will stand for nothing else. There shall be no thing
within remembrance's bounds but Him who is all."[28]

Bring yourself into the inner Sabbath and consider the work of Christ. The incarnation of God, his passion, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, these are the center and culmination of all revelation. The majesty of the ineffable Lord and the vileness of our sin meet together in the work of Christ. The Lord does not simply observe our sin impassively, but he bears it in his own body (1 Pet 2:24). We are saved by the blood of God (Acts 20:28). The Word of God, who is himself God, became flesh for us (John 1:1,14). His flesh and blood were created in time, but the Scripture still contrasts this precious blood with corruptible things (1 Pet 1:18-19); his blood is material, but not corruptible, having gained through the personal union of the two natures in Christ the divine attribute of incorruptibility. This incorruptible blood is our

28 Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg and Sigmund von Birken. *Meditations on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ*. University of Chicago Press, 2009. Page 53.

comfort, as it washes away our sins and frees us from condemnation.

In Christ "dwelleth all the fulness or the Godhead bodily"(Col 2:9). Jesus is the uncreated Lord, and the ineffable mystery of the infinite God is incomprehensibly deepened by the revelation that the infinite has become a man who bled and died for us. This truth is brought to us in the Word, and also in the Sacrament of the Altar, where the true flesh and blood of God are received into our mouths, the created flesh and blood partaking of the Lord's omnipresence.

If the work of Christ is at the center of the Scriptures, then the crucifixion is at the center of this work. In the crucifixion, we see the eternal God sacrificing himself to solve the problem of sin and death. Christ's sufferings have given us eternal life, and careful meditation on these sufferings is a great help in conquering the vestiges of sin that still plague us.

"[T]he Sufferings of Christ may well be compared to a precious stone or pearl, which a virgin of Christ preserves, that she may adorn herself therewith. She must meditate every day on the Sufferings of Christ, from the Last Supper to the Resurrection, and she must buy that pearl with all that she has and can gather together, in all her works, her thankfulness and longings. Herewith we ought to be able easily to overcome all the evil inclinations of our nature and our evil thoughts; herewith we ought soon to arrive at a heartfelt acknowledgment of our own weakness and infirmities, and to attain to deep humility; and thus go on to an inner, perfect sympathy with our Lord, and all men, in true love."[29]

29 Johann Tauler. *The Inner Way*. Methuen and Company, London, 1909. Pages 242-243.

In Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"(Col 2:3), and therefore we can truly strive to know nothing but Christ. In addition to having set times when we concentrate the whole heart and mind upon the work of Christ as related in the Gospels, we also must refer all knowledge and perception to him. We must recognize the crucified Lord as the "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world"(John 1:9), the light without which we cannot see or know anything. We must know all things as being under the Providence of the creator who made himself a creature in order to die and rise again. We must see all of our fellow men as sharing the same human nature as the God-man. During Christ's earthly ministry, his followers were very solicitous of his well-being, providing for the physical needs of the Lord of glory. While we cannot show our love directly to Christ in exactly the same way, he teaches us that we can receive and care for him through those around us:

"He took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me." (Mark 9:36-37)

"Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matt 25:40)

Scripture describes Christ as the cornerstone. All things were made through him, and he can therefore be seen as the cornerstone of all creation. He is also the cornerstone of the

spiritual house of the Church, being the source of our salvation. Through prayer and repentance, Christ is laid as the cornerstone in the depth of our hearts.

"Upon this foundation [the person of Jesus Christ], God has been pleased to raise the whole structure of our righteousness, faith, and eternal salvation...so he wills that on our side also the same be laid in the depth of our heart, and in the centre of our soul...God by this means might cleanse and justify a man from within, and in the inmost centre of his soul: for as man is inwardly corrupted by Satan, and infected in all the interior powers of his soul, so it is but fit that his cure should be wrought from within, and that all the faculties of his soul should be restored to their former integrity and soundness."[30]

When entering into the Sabbath rest to confess your sins to God, search out any diabolical foundation or root that still exists within your heart. Evaluate every thought and action, and determine whether it springs from Christ. Anything that does not have Christ as its foundation must be cast off.

The crucified and risen Christ is the center of all creation; when he is laid as the cornerstone in the inmost center of the soul, our spiritual perception is made alive, and we are ready to live in the new birth.

30 Johann Arndt. *True Christianity*. The Lutheran Book Store, Philadelphia, 1868. Page 168.

7. THE NEW BIRTH

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."
(John 3:6)

"O great and incomprehensible God, thou who fillest all things, be thou my heaven in which my New Birth in CHRIST JESUS may dwell: Let my Spirit be the stringed instrument, harmony, sound and joy of thy Holy Spirit. Strike the strings in me in thy regenerate image, and carry through my harmony into thy divine kingdom of joy, in the great love of God, in the wonders of thy glory and majesty, in the communion of the holy angelical harmony."[31]

Bring yourself into the inner Sabbath and consider that you are born of the Spirit, and that you are spirit. Your new birth was not by the will of man, but by the will of God, who decreed to bring you from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Tear out all false thoughts suggesting you have contributed anything to this new birth. You were as passive in your new birth as you were in your birth according to the flesh. Be confident in your new birth to cry out to your Heavenly Father with the helplessness of a child. Ask that your Father remove all pretensions to personal wisdom and self-sufficiency, and ever grow in your dependence on the Almighty.

31 Jacob Boehme. *The Way to Christ*. John M Watkins, London, 1964. Page 41.

"The new birth takes place only in children, that is, in those who are poor in spirit, who hate, abandon, [and] deny themselves and lose themselves in God, not when they desire and want to have it, but rather when God wants, which is without any desiring, wanting, pursuing, knowing, and recognizing of theirs, God himself effects the new birth, faith. Nature is dead, knows nothing about it. But you do hear the rushing of the wind, that is, you feel and experience the renewal in yourself. However, you do not know whither or whence, as Christ testifies (John 3:8). The children are the best at this; they should remain a pattern and model for us all."[32]

We have confessed along with the seraphim that the Lord of hosts is holy, and in his presence recognized our own vileness (Isa 6:3-5); by grace we have been given to eat of the heavenly altar and our sins have been taken away (Isa 6:7). We have been forgiven through the death of Christ, and we have been born again through his resurrection (1 Pet 1:3). This is the fruit that springs from the crucifixion; the joy of the free forgiveness of sins is multiplied in the joy of walking in the new birth. Truly our mourning has been turned into dancing, and we have been clothed with gladness (Ps 30:11). We are not merely to be content with the assurance that we will know joy in the future, as this joy is our promised treasure even in this life, as a foretaste of our future bliss. When we were born of the Spirit we "were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance"(Eph 1:13-14).

"[I]t is not enough that we hear the Word with the outward ear, but we must let it penetrate to our heart, so that we may

32 Valentin Weigel. *On the Place of the World*, in *Valentin Weigel: Selected Spiritual Writings*. Paulist Press, 2003. Page 140.

hear the Holy Spirit speak there, that is, with vibrant emotion and comfort feel the sealing of the Spirit."[33]

Through the new birth we became children of God, and therefore heirs of an incorruptible inheritance. As heirs our possession is now radically different from what we claimed as ours according to the flesh. For all that is flesh will pass away, but we seek a city that is to come, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22, 13:14). Material, created objects will be removed, but we receive "a kingdom which cannot be moved"(Heb 12:28). The uncreated Lord is himself our inheritance (Ps 16:5), and although we are created beings, through the new birth we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4), and as members of the heavenly kingdom we will share in the Lord's incorruptibility, dwelling where there are "pleasures evermore"(Ps 16:11). These everlasting pleasures become more sensible to us as we turn our hearts away from temporal things.

"I am not where I appear to be. I live upon earth, but my life is in heaven; for my affections are set upon things above, not upon things on the earth. Even whilst united to this tabernacle of the body, the soul is in heaven, as imprisoned, and yet free."[34]

Christ teaches us that the new birth comes through water and the Spirit (John 3:5). When we strive to "walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit"(Rom 8:1), we must remember our

33 Philipp Jakob Spener. *Pia Desideria*. Fortress Press, 1964. Page 117.

34 Heinrich Mueller. *Hours of Spiritual Refreshment*. The Religious Tract Society, London, 1841. Page 195.

baptism; for "we are buried with him in baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life"(Rom 6:4). Through the grace of this "washing of regeneration"(Titus 3:5) God washes our hearts from wickedness, directing us away from vain, worldly thoughts (Jer 4:14).

Mystical prayer is the great weapon in the battle of the mind, in which our eternal fate is at stake. St. Paul warns us that those who have been born of the Spirit must contemplate the things of the Spirit, not the things of the flesh; and he most starkly tells us that "to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace"(Rom 8:5-6). Turning back from the grace of God towards carnal desires is the way to death. In the Sabbath rest before God, pray that the carnal mind be completely slain. Banish all thoughts of what is earthly and transitory, and contemplate the pure life of Christ in heaven.

"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God." (Col 3:1-3)

Jesus tells us that "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt 6:21). Therefore, when, through the grace of regeneration, we are able to lift up our soul unto the Lord and not unto vanity (Ps 24:4), we can say that we dwell in heaven even now, and that our true life is hid with Christ from carnal eyes.

"[I]n the second birth from heaven, lies the entire Christ, with all heavenly eternal goods. There the kingdom of God is entire and complete, but not apparent; it must be awaited, recognized, found, felt, [and] tasted in the inner ground of the soul."[35]

Those who are born of the Spirit have been made temples of the Spirit. Thus heaven and its treasures are not far from us. Thomas Bromley provides us with an aid to enjoy this treasure by suggesting that there are inner spiritual senses that correspond to the bodily senses:

"[W]e...hear the songs, voices and harmony of angels, with the harpers upon Mount Sion, who there continually praise the Lord; we smell the perfumes of Christ's garments, and are often entertained with paradisical odours; we touch and feel the powerful tincture of Christ's body, which many times strongly affects the heart with powerful delight; we also taste the heavenly manna, and those dews of paradise which are sweeter than honey."[36]

I do not believe that we should understand Bromley to be describing visionary or hallucinatory experience, for he is discussing spiritual, not physical perception. His examples should immediately remind the reader of various passages from Scripture, such as, "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"(Ps 119:103). In fact we all constantly use words originally meant to denote physical sensations or properties in order to describe our inner state, words such as "bitter" or "sweet", "heavy" or "light", etc.

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35 Valentin Weigel. *The Golden Grasp*, in *Valentin Weigel: Selected Spiritual Writings*. Paulist Press, 2003. Page 187.

36 Thomas Bromley. *The Way to the Sabbath Rest*. J. Baker, London, 1710. Page 14. [spelling modernized by author]

God himself is an ineffable spirit, and yet even he reveals himself to us using words that correspond to physical sensation. God is the creator and governor of all physical reality and all bodily sensation. He created us to know and worship him. Therefore we must not view the correspondence between physical sensation and God's revelation of himself as accidental. I do not think it is going too far to say that God created our physical senses for the express purpose of using these senses to reveal himself to us, first of all that we might know him as the giver of all good gifts, and second that we might have analogous descriptions by which we can come to have some understanding of his ineffable nature.

Upon entering into the inner Sabbath, contemplate each physical sense and how it is used in Scripture as an analogy of God and his grace. Let the Spirit teach you that the part of your soul that can enjoy taste was meant much more to taste that the Lord is good, rather than to taste the goodness of perishable food; that the part of the soul that delights in pleasant images was created to see God; that the part of the soul that enjoys physical rest was designed to enjoy the peace that passes understanding. Confess with the psalmist that, "Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased"(Ps 4:7). In this way you can come to delight in the heavenly treasures, and the pleasures desired by the carnal mind will become insipid.

8. SELF-WILL PART 1: INTRODUCTION

"And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt."
(Mark 14:36)

"Lord, as Thou wilt, deal Thou with me;
No other wish I cherish.
In life and death I cling to Thee;
Oh, do not let me perish!
Let not Thy grace from me depart
And grant an ever patient heart
To bear what Thou dost send me."[37]

"If [man] is to be helped, he must come again to the place of giving himself over to God and allowing God according to God's pleasure to do with him what he will and rule over him. This state we call resignation; it is the chief virtue of the first commandment."[38]

Bring yourself into the inner Sabbath, and consider all the areas where your will is contrary to God's will; see how much of your life is the edifice of self-will, and ask that God tear this edifice down.

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37 Kaspar Bienemann. "Lord, as Thou Wilt, Deal Thou With Me", in *The Lutheran Hymnal*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941.

38 Philipp Jakob Spener. *Resignation*, in *Pietists: Selected Writings*. Paulist Press, 1983. Page 83.

The denial of self-will or self-love (often described as "resignation" or "renunciation") is the great work of the Christian life. Therefore this topic is covered over multiple chapters. The introductory chapter gives a general description of the denial of self-will and how it is taught by Christ. Then follows two detailed studies on the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. Finally we look at how the denial of self-will prepares us for union with God.

Self-will is any desire of the heart that is contrary to God's will for us. It is much more extensive than simply making sinful choices or having sinful thoughts; self-will is the foundation of the entire fallen world, it is the poison that colors and perverts everything that we think and do. When you pray that God reveal your sin to you, this prayer can often be answered by showing you the depth of your self-will. God will show you how much you trust in your own self-will and self-righteousness rather than in him alone. He will show you how much you cherish your own abilities and pretensions, and how much you hope in your own potential accomplishments in this life, even in vain and unrealistic fantasies about your own greatness. This tearing away of illusions can be very painful, but it is necessary in order to achieve what St. Paul describes: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me"(Gal 2:20).

Our self-will is not what God intends us to be. It is something that must be conquered and destroyed. Only then can we taste the fullness of joy that is found in God's presence (Ps 16:11), accepting all things that come from his hand.

"if [a Christian] does not, in a completely uncommon and heroic way, test his resignation from all creatures and especially lay aside his own self-love, he will not be able to experience any further and higher step in wisdom's glory."[39]

This work of resignation is carried out by obeying God's law and by patiently bearing our crosses. Self-will rages at the crosses that God sends us, but the heart that is resigned to God's will accepts them, trusting that all things work to the good of those who live by faith.

When first considering this topic, there can frequently arise the misconception that in order to deny self-will we must reduce ourselves to nothingness. This misconception fails to properly balance what is said in the Scriptures. While St. Paul does say that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure"(Philippians 2:13), Christ also says that it is we who do the will of God (Matt 7:21). When working in his saints, God does not work in nothingness but in a human heart. When we deny self-will, this does not mean that we no longer have a will, for it is the regenerated will that obeys God. Solomon tells us, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding"(Prov 3:5), but this does not mean that we no longer possess the faculty of understanding or that this faculty is no longer active; rather, the understanding is filled with God's wisdom instead of man's wisdom.

39 Gottfried Arnold. *The Mystery of the Divine Sophia*, in *Pietists: Selected Writings*. Paulist Press, 1983. Page 221.

"Certain men say that we ought to be without will, wisdom, love, desire, knowledge, and the like. Hereby is not to be understood that there is to be no knowledge in man, and that God is not to be loved by him, nor desired and longed for, nor praised and honored; for that were a great loss, and man were like the beasts and as the brutes that have no reason. But it means that man's knowledge should be so clear and perfect that he should acknowledge of a truth that in himself he neither has nor can do any good thing, and that none of his knowledge, wisdom and art, his will, love and good works do come from himself, nor are of man, nor of any creature, but that all these are of the eternal God, from whom they all proceed."[40]

Some passages from the mystics might be misunderstood to mean that we must do away with our will in an absolute sense; but if the will of the saints were reduced to absolute nothingness, there would be no living hearts to love God. When we read, for example, in the *Theologia Germanica* that we do wrong when we use the words "I", "me", and "mine"[41], what the author means is that these words are harmful when they imply that we belong to ourselves rather than to God. Amongst Christians, the "I" is still present, for it is the "I" that believes, while faith, which is the ability of the "I" to believe, is itself a gift of God. When the "I" believes with its own corrupted strength, it believes falsehood.

Jacob Boehme illustrates this concept by saying that the Christian must resign his will to God and must will nothing without God, and that when he does this, the will of the Christian is already in heaven.

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40 Anonymous, *Theologia Germanica*. Scriptoria Books, 2014. Page 6.
41 Ibid., page 5.

"Consider then the words of Christ, who said, 'Without me ye can do nothing.' In thy own power thou canst not come to such rest that no creature should touch thee, unless thou givest thyself wholly up to the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, and resignest thy will and desire wholly to him, and willest nothing without Him. Then with thy body thou art in the world, in the properties, and with thy reason under the cross of our Lord Christ; with thy will thou walkest in heaven."[42]

This is the resignation that the Christian must cultivate. He is resigned to the fact that his body is in the world, subject to the physical corruption and danger that has been brought about by sin. His reason is crucified, every rebellious thought having been put to death. In this way he gains the supernatural rest in which creatures cannot disturb his communion with God.

When the will, the desire of the heart, has been removed from the body and the created reason, and is fixed on God alone, the heart is no longer wounded or drawn into frustration and anxiety when misfortunes occur in the world. The human will now dwells in heaven, rejoicing in the will of God together with the angels and the glorified saints.

When, on the contrary, the heart puts its hope in worldly events, the will is said to go "into the creatures". God made every creature to be a revelation of himself and his working, but if the creatures instead become the final object of the will, man's communion with God is seriously damaged.

"If thou dost abide with thy will in the words of Christ, then His word and spirit abide in thee. But if thy will goeth into the creatures, then thou hast broken off thyself from Him, and

42 Jacob Boehme. *The Way to Christ*. John M Watkins, London, 1964. Page 134.

then thou canst not any other way keep thyself, but by abiding continually in resigned humility, and entering into continual repentance, so that thou art always grieved that creatures live in thee."[43]

This distinction between having our will in heaven or in the creatures helps us to understand in what sense we are to hate our own life, as Christ commands us to do (John 12:25).

"...the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the reproach of the world which hateth thee, thou must learn to love, and take for a daily exercise of thy repentance. And then thou shalt have continual cause to hate thyself in the creature, and to seek the eternal rest."[44]

We must hate ourselves insofar as our will is in the creatures, insofar as our hearts rejoice in created things apart from the will of God. At the same time, because we are beloved by God for Christ's sake, and have been made partakers of the divine nature, we must also love ourselves.

"loving thyself thou lovest not thyself, as thy own, but as given from the love of God; thou lovest the divine ground in thee; by which thou lovest the divine wisdom, God's works of wonder, and thy brethren."[45]

We are to love ourselves because of the divine ground within us, because we have been made temples of the Holy Spirit, and because by grace our will already dwells in heaven. Repentance and hatred of our carnal life are necessary, but

43 Ibid., page 135.
44 Ibid., page 135.
45 Ibid., page 139.

they must be balanced by this purified self-love. If this balance is not found, the godly denial of self can be perverted into self-cursing and psychological self-harm.

Our God is a consuming fire, and he dwells within us. When seeking God within ourselves, we have access to this purifying flame and we can submerge ourselves into it to burn up the remaining traces of self-will. When we accepted the Gospel promise that we are saved by faith alone, we confessed that we cannot contribute anything to our salvation. In denying self-will, in denying that we are ever permitted to act independent of God in any area, we are repeating and deepening this same confession.

Having analyzed and defined the concept of self-will, we now turn to the words of Christ. Here we see that the denial of self-will is not a theological abstraction; rather, it is central to understanding and applying the most important and well known teachings of our savior.

Taking Up the Cross

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt 16:24-26)

In the inner Sabbath, consider all of the crosses that God has sent you. Do you gladly bear them? If not, ask God to give you

the grace to overcome any impediments that prevent you from taking up your cross as Christ has commanded.

It is God's will that we take up our cross, while it is self-will that refuses or complains about our cross. In the cross of Christ we have the greatest representation of the renunciation of self-will. Even Christ, though sinless, suffered great agony prior to his Crucifixion as he said to his Father, "not as I will, but as thou wilt"(Matt 26:39). The old man rebels against the idea of obediently and contentedly taking up our cross, and we must remain vigilant in order to identify and reject the objections that will come from the flesh when we encounter a cross sent by God. Our refusal the take up our own cross teaches us how deeply self-will infects us, and how little we have exercised the faith that has been given to us. "[A]s long as [any] flinching from the cross is in thee, thy faith is not what it should be".[46]

Jesus makes it clear that our denial of self-will must reach to and overcome even our instinct for survival, and that if we cannot deny ourselves to this degree, we risk losing our soul. We must come before God and renounce our self-will, telling him that although we still flinch from and fear the cross, by faith we affirm that our life belongs to Christ, and that we will lose our life for his sake. It is a gift from God to be able to speak thus. Speaking these words of renunciation from the heart is the fruit of faith, and it is the beginning of the conquest of self-will.

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46 August Hermann Francke. *Nicodemus.* S. Hazard, Bath, 1801. Page 47.

The Beatitudes

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." (Matt 5:3-12)

Each of the beatitudes can be understood as a blessing that comes from the denial of self-will. Self-will wishes to be rich, to rejoice constantly in this life, to assert itself, to satisfy its hunger and thirst with worldly goods, to avenge its wrongs, to fill the heart with the pleasure of vice, to dominate in conflict, to receive adoration and praise from other men. In the inner Sabbath, consider one by one the virtues mentioned in the beatitudes, and ask that God would make each of these an adornment for your soul.

The beatitudes begin with poverty of spirit, and this is perhaps the most central and challenging of the virtues commended by Christ in this passage. It is easy to see how the desire for worldly revenge or domination could be spiritual impediments, but understanding the importance of spiritual poverty takes greater discernment. This is because, in one sense, we are supposed to be spiritually rich, for we are made

heirs of an everlasting kingdom and are promised heavenly treasures; but to be spiritually poor is to understand that none of this spiritual wealth comes from our own effort, and that relying on our own effort in fact robs us of our imperishable wealth.

"True faith is always accompanied by an entire renunciation of self, self-righteousness, self-glory—all confidence in self. The more faith, the more poverty of spirit. The man spiritually poor sees nothing in himself but weakness and misery; feels that he has nothing, knows nothing, and can do nothing of himself; but he is rich in faith because he possesses in Jesus Christ an inexhaustible store of wisdom, righteousness, understanding, and strength."[47]

The more we become poor in spirit, denying that we possess anything good from our own power, the more we can receive the grace of God.

Spiritual poverty can remain elusive even as many outward virtues are practiced, for self-will always seeks to retain a stronghold somewhere deep in the heart. Self-will can tolerate many good works done in accordance with God's law as long as it can claim credit for them, turning these good works into an occasion for the soul-destroying sin of pride. St. Paul says, "though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (1 Cor 13:3). That is, the inmost attitude of the heart must be correct in order to profit by obeying God. A truly poor spirit has given up all claims on outward praise

47 David Hollaz. *The Order of Evangelical Grace in the Economy of Salvation.* J. Eedes, London, 1838. Page 157.

and self-satisfaction. It does not seek spiritual wealth from itself or from men, but from God alone.

The Greatest Commandment

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment." (Matt 22:37-38)

The greatest commandment requires that we destroy every last possible stronghold of self-will. Every part of us must be sanctified to the Lord. Our mind must love the Lord's thoughts, and our heart must love the Lord's will for us and for all creation. We must love the Lord with every activity of the soul, both internal and external. *Any work that is not done out of love for God makes us guilty of violating the greatest commandment.* That is precisely why this commandment is put first, for without this total love for God, we cannot properly fulfill any commandment. It must be out of the love of God that we love others or enjoy any creatures.

When self-will is dead, all willing should arise at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Loving God with all your heart means hearing and obeying the love of God that dwells in your heart by faith. Obedience to this commandment is thus a gift of God, one of the many blessings that comes from God working within us.

"No man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in a secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that they which come in may see the light...If thy whole body therefore be full of light, having no part dark, the whole shall be full of

light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light.” (Luke 11:33,36)

When we allow self-will to reign, we hinder the divine light from illuminating our entire body and soul. Any deed of the body or sentiment of the soul that proceeds from self-will brings in darkness. Jesus is the true light and uncreated wisdom of God. We cannot kindle the true light through our own effort. Only by abandoning our own wisdom and ceasing from our own will can we come to perceive the bright shining light that is everywhere present.

9. SELF-WILL PART 2: JOB

The renunciation of self-will is taught throughout Scripture, but perhaps nowhere as clearly and in such detail as the book of Job. For the purposes of understanding what the book of Job teaches us about self-will, it is useful to divide the text into the following sections.

1. Job's calamity and praiseworthy response
2. Job's blameworthy response
3. Job's rebuke and final repentance

1. Job's calamity and praiseworthy response

The book begins with Satan coming before God and claiming that if Job were to lose all of his earthly blessings, he would curse God (1:11). God initially allows Satan to destroy Job's children and his possessions, but not to harm Job's person (1:12). Job's response to the loss of his earthly blessings shows a strong faith and an acceptance of God's will:

"Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (1:20-21)

In response to his loss, Job mourns in an appropriate way, but still concludes by blessing God and confessing God's sovereignty over all things.

Satan comes before God again, and says that Job would curse God if he were afflicted in his body (2:5). God allows Satan to afflict Job's body, but not to kill him (2:6). Job is smitten with boils, and his suffering is so great that his wife even encourages him to curse God (2:9). Job again responds to his calamity in a godly way:

"But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips." (2:10)

2. Job's blameworthy response

At this point Satan has failed, for Job does not curse God despite his calamity. But God is still not content with Job's response, and he continues to refine his servant. In chapters 3-31, there is a lengthy dialogue between Job and his three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Job's conduct in this dialogue draws the rebuke of Elihu (chapters 31-37) and of the Lord himself (chapters 38-41). The dialogue between Job and his friends requires careful discernment. Many passages in these chapters contain truth, but taken as a whole, Job and his friends all fall short. Even the celebrated saying of Job "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him"(13:15) is from this section. We should consider in what way Job's attitude falls short of

what God demands from us and what it truly means to deny ourselves.

This dialogue between Job and his friends begins with Job cursing himself, specifically condemning the day of his birth, and wishing that he had been stillborn:

"After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day. And Job spake, and said, Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived." (3:1-3)

"Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?" (3:11)

Job is here cursing both himself and the crosses that have come from the Lord. Although he has denied his self-will in accepting that God had a right to take his possessions, family and health, he does not take up these crosses from the depth of his heart, but allows self-will to reign within. Another major failing on Job's part is that he views God as being against him.

"He hath cast me into the mire, and I am become like dust and ashes. I cry unto thee, and thou dost not hear me: I stand up, and thou regardest me not. Thou art become cruel to me: with thy strong hand thou opposest thyself against me." (30:19-21)

"When I looked for good, then evil came unto me: and when I waited for light, there came darkness." (30:26)

3. Job's rebuke and final repentance

Upon completing his complaint, Job is rebuked by the new interlocutor Elihu:

"Then was kindled the wrath of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the kindred of Ram: against Job was his wrath kindled, **because he justified himself rather than God**." (32:2)

"Surely thou hast spoken in mine hearing, and I have heard the voice of thy words, saying, I am clean without transgression, I am innocent; neither is there iniquity in me. Behold, he findeth occasions against me, he counteth me for his enemy, He putteth my feet in the stocks, he marketh all my paths. Behold, in this thou art not just: I will answer thee, that God is greater than man. Why dost thou strive against him? for he giveth not account of any of his matters." (33:8-13)

"Thinkest thou this to be right, that thou saidst, My righteousness is more than God's?" (35:2)

We must never think, like Job, that God considers us to be enemies, for this is a lack of faith. We must never suppose that we love God while he hates us (slays us without a cause), or that our love for God is greater than his love for us. In saying that we love God more than he loves us we claim that we have greater righteousness than God. Rather, we must confess with Elihu that God works "That he may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from man"(33:17), and that God's will for us is always to bring our hearts out of the perishing world into a richer enjoyment of eternal life:

"Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, To bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living." (33:29-30)

True denial of self-will is not merely a resignation to suffering, but a rejoicing in God's will for us, no matter the severity of our crosses.

"What man is like Job, who drinketh up scorning like water? Which goeth in company with the workers of iniquity, and walketh with wicked men. For he hath said, It profiteth a man nothing that he should delight himself with God. Therefore hearken unto me ye men of understanding: far be it from God, that he should do wickedness; and from the Almighty, that he should commit iniquity." (34:7-10)

In saying that his crosses made his life not worth living, Job is implying that delighting in God alone is worthless. By faith God is made our dwelling place and our possession, and this should be enough to make us full of joy, no matter our outward circumstances.

Elihu then begins to argue for the position that God himself takes up in the final chapters of the book: that God and man are incommensurate, and that therefore the will of man must never set itself up against the will of God.

"Look unto the heavens, and see; and behold the clouds which are higher than thou. If thou sinnest, what doest thou against him? or if thy transgressions be multiplied, what doest thou unto him? If thou be righteous, what givest thou him? or what receiveth he of thine hand?" (35:5-7)

"Behold, God is great, and we know him not, neither can the number of his years be searched out." (36:26)

"Hearken unto this, O Job: stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God." (37:14)

"Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out: he is excellent in power, and in judgment, and in plenty of justice: he will not

afflict. Men do therefore fear him: he respecteth not any that are wise of heart." (37:23-24)

After Elihu finishes his speech, God himself addresses Job "out of the whirlwind", demonstrating his power over all creation. The rebuke delivered by God can be divided into two sections.

i) God as creator and sovereign

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" (38:1-2)

"Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding." (38:4)

"Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?" (38:17)

"Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given understanding to the heart?" (38:36)

God demonstrates our relative ignorance by pointing out how limited our knowledge is. God has witnessed all things, while we have only recently been born. God knows what lies beyond our earthly life, while death would be a mystery to us without God's revelation. Finally, it is God himself who has put understanding into our hearts. It is folly to think that we can judge a cross sent by God. Attempting to judge God and his ways comes from the flesh and self-will.

This rebuke from the Lord causes Job to recognize his error, and he repents of his former folly:

"Moreover the Lord answered Job, and said, Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it. Then Job answered the Lord, and said, Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further." (40:1-5)

Earlier Elihu had admonished Job to "stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God"(37:14), and here Job says that he will maintain silence. Self-will is destroyed by this attitude of stillness and silence when viewing God's creation, especially any crosses sent to us by the Lord.

ii) God as judge and savior (rebuke continues)

Even after Job begins to repent, the Lord presses forward with his rebuke.

"Then answered the Lord unto Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Gird up thy loins now like a man: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous? Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him? Deck thyself now with majesty and excellency; and array thyself with glory and beauty. Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath: and behold every one that is proud, and abase him. Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place. Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret. Then will I also confess unto thee that thine own right hand can save thee." (40:6-14)

In our fallen world we are often ruled by the proud who seek to tyrannize their fellow men. We can put our trust in God because he has the power to humble all those who are proud

and wicked. Until we possess a like power to execute judgment upon the wicked, we cannot claim to have the power to save ourselves or judge the righteousness of God's providence. When we complain about our cross rather than taking it up with faith, we imitate the "king over all the children of pride" (41:34) rather than Christ.

This further rebuke brings an even deeper repentance:

"Then Job answered the Lord, and said, I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (42:1-6)

Job confesses the Lord's omnipotence and omniscience; he admits that he sinned by speaking of things beyond his knowledge; he will patiently wait on the instruction of the Lord; having been illuminated by the vision of God, he now denies himself.

When suffering the loss of friends, family, possessions, or our physical health, we should follow the example of Job in chapters 1-2, denying our self-will by blessing God and confessing that it is his sovereign right to deal with us as he pleases. When outward crosses lead us to inward despair, we must relentlessly wage the battle of the mind, making use of the sword of the Spirit, cutting off all false thoughts at the root. We must stop our mouths from all complaining and judging,

and pray that God take away all impediments that prevent us from obediently taking up our cross. We do not love God despite the crosses he sends us, rather we love God because of the crosses he sends us, trusting that they are sent for our good, and that by God's grace they will bring us into closer communion with him.

10. SELF-WILL PART 3: ECCLESIASTES

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal."
(Matt 6:19)

"take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?"
(Matt 6:34)

The book of Ecclesiastes is often misunderstood, with many assuming that the author is pessimistic or full of complaints. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just as the book of Job teaches us to deny self-will in times of suffering, Ecclesiastes teaches us to deny self-will in all seasons of life: in our suffering, our striving, and our prosperity. The book can be used as a guide to purifying the heart of carnal attachments and anxiety.

"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity." (1:2)

The most well-known concept from Ecclesiastes is that "all is vanity". "Vanity" means emptiness, something that is unsubstantial and quick to pass away. The key to reading Ecclesiastes is to understand that much of what the author labels as "vanity" is the focus of the fallen will. Worldly wisdom,

carnal enjoyment, human plans for the future; all of these things are "vanity" in the sense that they are impermanent and uncertain. It is therefore foolish to allow the will to dwell in these empty and passing things, rather than dwelling in our eternal God. When our heart is set on earthly pursuits, we neglect to lay up treasure in heaven.

The book concludes by saying "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man"(12:13). Man was created to stand in awe before God and obey him, and any deviation from this purpose is self-will and vanity. We are equally able to fulfill our duty in prosperity and calamity, because our duty is to be obedient to the eternal and unchanging Lord. Through fearing and obeying God we can overcome the unbelieving anxiety that seeks consolation and fulfillment in deceitful worldly objects.

The Vanity of Worldly Wisdom

"I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit." (1:13-14)

In addition to the special gift of divine wisdom granted by God, Solomon was also known for his investigation into the natural world (1 Kings 4:33), or "all things that are done under heaven". Solomon tells us that he excelled all others in this pursuit of worldly wisdom (1:16), but concludes by saying that "this also is vexation of spirit" (1:17). In the book of Proverbs

Solomon expounds on the delights of the divine wisdom, but here he warns us of the vanity of putting our trust in worldly knowledge and wisdom. Worldly wisdom is one of the most subtle and dangerous of idols, as it plausibly presents itself as useful and praiseworthy. But when the will dwells in worldly wisdom and the heart hopes in it, man becomes entangled in vanity.

The Vanity of Carnal Desire

"the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" (1:8)

"He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity." (5:10)

"All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled." (6:7)

Carnal desire is never fully satisfied. When the will dwells in the desire of the senses or in the love of earthly wealth, it will never find peace. This insight gains special force when it is spoken by Solomon, for he enjoyed unparalleled wealth and splendor, and had the ability to satisfy his every desire.

"I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity...I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour." (2:1,9-10)

Thus it is wrong to assume that the satisfaction of carnal desire could ever bring peace, even when enjoying great abundance. It is simply the nature of carnal desire to be vain and fleeting.

The Vanity of Human Labor

"I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity." (2:18-19)

Here we see Solomon attacking what can be a respectable idol in the Church. Christians are to hope and work for a godly posterity, and to provide an inheritance for future generations. But we must distinguish between hoping *for* something and putting our hope *in* something. When we hope for something just and desirable, we can certainly be sorrowful when it fails to come to pass, but we do not necessarily fall into despair or hopelessness. When we hope in something contingent, such as the wise conduct of our posterity, the will dwells in vanity, for it dwells in something uncertain. Self-will looks upon things that are inherently uncertain and acts as if they were certain. God and his law are the only certainties, and when our will submits to the will of God in all things, then we have peace. Our joy in providing an inheritance should come from the fact that by doing so we are being obedient to God's word, not from the expectation that the inheritance will be used wisely.

Resigned Enjoyment of God's Gifts

"There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God." (2:24)

"Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun." (8:15)

"Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun." (9:7-9)

While Solomon warns against an ungodly attachment to carnal enjoyment, he does not endorse an extreme asceticism that denies all sensual enjoyment. Such asceticism can lead to its own prison of pride and self-will.[48] We must recognize lawful earthly enjoyments for what they really are: gifts from God that will pass away. We must use them for temporary comfort, not as the dwelling place of the will. This pious enjoyment leaves the heart satisfied and oriented towards God. We are commanded to receive the earthly gifts of God with joy and faith, avoiding the anxiety for the future that Christ warns against (Matt 6:34). Mirth in the present moment is

48 See Appendix B for a further discussion of asceticism.

commended when it is in opposition to anxiety over our earthly future.

Dead to the World

"A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." (7:1-4)

While simple enjoyment is better than anxiety, pious mourning is best of all. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, understanding that this world is passing away, rather than in the house of mirth, thinking that life as it now is is the ultimate and final joy. Mirth becomes ungodly when it is used as a distraction from the reality of death and judgment.

"Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun: But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity." (11:7-8)

The created light is pleasant, but we must also remember the days of darkness that await the physical eye after death. We are to live faithfully in this world, following the commandments of God, but we must always remember that death is better than this life and yearn for the day when the spirit returns to God and the body returns to dust (12:7). Turning our heart

away from this life of vanity and coming to welcome death is the great triumph of faith over self-will.

Walking By Faith

"Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God." (8:11-13)

The wicked see that evil can often triumph, and this causes them to think that they can act without facing punishment. They walk by sight, not by faith. Though we yearn for justice to be done, we must direct our hearts to a future judgment, and bear with the injustice of the present time without bitterness or despair. Self-will desires instant vindication of all wrongs, while we must patiently trust that vengeance belongs to the Lord.

"the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God...All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath." (9:1-2)

"For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them." (9:12)

In the book of Proverbs, Solomon often speaks of the blessings that come to those who are upright in their conduct, such as "He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich"(Prov 10:4). While these sayings are generally true, they are not absolute in every case, for very often calamity and failure comes to the just. We can never know what calamity might come upon us suddenly; loss of life, wealth, family or reputation can come as unexpectedly as a bird is caught in a snare. Despite this uncertainty, we must walk by faith; we must trust that we and our works are in the hand of God. A man who is ruled by self-will can have the illusion of peace only when he deceives himself into thinking that the objects of his hope and desire are totally secure. Through the renunciation of self-will, we can have peace even when accepting that unknown and sudden suffering might lie before us.

11. SELF-WILL PART 4: TOWARDS UNION WITH GOD

"O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."
(Jer 10:23)

"We must give ourselves to the Holy Spirit as an empty canvas on which he is to paint."[49]

Bring yourself into the inner Sabbath, and search out the origin of your every thought and desire. Repent of all that originates from self-will rather than from the Holy Spirit working and willing within you.

Through contemplation you will learn that much, perhaps nearly all, of your former mental and emotional life existed in the edifices built by self-will. Prior to searching the heart for the roots of self-will, we often experience choices and actions as if they occur of themselves. We are in fact almost surprised by our own actions and words, sometimes regretting choices that seem to be made spontaneously. After entering upon the life of deep prayer and repentance, one comes to understand that self-will is the cause of these motions in the soul. It then becomes clear that the mature Christian life must be radically different in our moment to moment psychological

49 Philipp Jakob Spener. *Resignation*, in *Pietists: Selected Writings*. Paulist Press, 1983. Page 85.

experience. As you were not born by the will of man, so you should not think or walk by the will of man. Christ's yoke is easy, because it is sweet and comforting for us when his will becomes our will. Once we recognize that self-will is what steals our peace, it becomes a joy to put this thief to death.

"The greatest joy in heaven is the will of God. When self-will turns to his will, the divine joy enters the troubled heart of men and women."[50]

God's will does not simply desire different things than our will, it is a totally different kind of will, because his will is peace, and dwelling in his will is to dwell in peace and in heaven, while dwelling in our self-will is hell and misery. To have peace with God means to be at peace with his will, to view his will as an ally, not an enemy.

"...inasmuch as [the creature] lives in its own will, it finds no rest, peace, and bliss, no more than does a fish on dry land, or the like. Therefore, were there no self-will, there would be no hell, but rather the purest heaven. Heaven, however, is the will of God or Christ...It is entirely a matter of the will whether one is in God in heaven [or] in the devil in hell, and that one carries heaven or hell within oneself."[51]

When we pray "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", we are asking that our self-will be annihilated, and that Christ and heaven be conceived and brought forth within us (Matt 12:50). Once the heavenly will has been born within us we can

50 Mechthild of Magdeburg. *The Will of Go*d, in *Beguine Spirituality*. The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, 1990. Page 80.

51 Valentin Weigel. *On the Place of the World*, in *Valentin Weigel: Selected Spiritual Writings*. Paulist Press, 2003. Pages 110 and 138.

confidently say that we dwell "in the secret place of the most High...under the shadow of the Almighty"(Ps 91:1), and that this refuge ensures our joy and confidence even if the whole creation shall melt away (Ps 46:1-2). The heaven of heavens is omnipresent, and when our treasure is in heaven, when our inheritance is the God who fills heaven and earth, our treasure is everywhere.

These promises of peace and rest for those who trust in the Lord rather than in their own strength must be kept in mind in order to prevent ungodly sorrow or anxiety that can form when we face the enormous task of renouncing self-will. For although Christ commands us to take up our cross, he also says,

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt 11:28-30)

This is a great paradox of the Christian faith: we are to take up our cross, a cross so grievous that we may be required to lay down our lives, and yet this burden is light. The paradox is resolved by coming to perceive that God works and wills within us, and that we are to cast our cares upon him and to rely on his strength at all times. If we try to bear our cross with our own strength, we will end up like Job prior to his repentance.

"The moment you perceive any enemy or temptation approaching, whether within or without, imitate little frightened children, who run quickly to hide themselves in the bosom of

their mother; that is to say, hasten in spirit and by faith to take refuge in the bosom of Jesus, for it is there you will be in safety."[52]

The gift of humility can wean us from the reflexive response of stirring up our own strength when faced with difficulty. Only when we acknowledge ourselves to be as helpless as children can we hope to be saved from our enemies.

This principle of relying constantly on the power of God is taught throughout the Old Testament. When Israel becomes weak in faith, the people seek security in the arm of the flesh rather than in God. This worldly confidence in material strength always leads to ever greater suffering and disaster. Isaiah rebuked the Israelites of his day who trusted in military strength and an alliance with the idolatrous Egyptians, saying,

"Woe to the rebellious children, saith the Lord, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin: That walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt your confusion." (Isa 30:1-3)

"For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not. But ye said, No; for we will flee upon horses; therefore shall ye flee: and, We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift." (Isa 30:15-16)

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52 David Hollaz. *The Order of Evangelical Grace in the Economy of Salvation.* J. Eedes, London, 1838. Page 74.

"Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord shall stretch out his hand, both he that helpeth shall fall, and he that is holpen shall fall down, and they all shall fail together." (Isa 31:3)

This teaching of Isaiah can be applied to our own spiritual struggle. God has given us his Holy Spirit to be our protection and guide, and yet we often seek the covering of our own carnal strength instead of this divine defense, leaning upon our own wisdom rather than hearing the word of God. The Lord has called us into his Sabbath rest, and he has promised that certain victory will follow this quiet resignation and trust in his operation, but we manifest our lack of faith by busying ourselves with our own anxiety and effort, seeking our consolation in things that appear to be under our own control. The strength of God and the strength of man are incommensurate, and this compounds the folly of trusting in the strength of the weaker. If we live by the strength of God, our certain victory will last into eternity, but if we live by our own strength or the strength of other sinful men, God will confound our efforts and we will find only everlasting shame and defeat.

God sent his beloved son into the world in order to unite himself to us. He desires our whole heart, and he will work in us to remove all rivals and impediments to this union. The denial of self-will frees us from the carnal attachments that prevent us from obeying Christ's greatest commandment.

"Let us therefore wholly renounce our own strength, our own wisdom, our own will, and self-love, that, being thus resigned to God alone, we may suffer his power freely to work in us, so that nothing may, in the least, oppose the will and operations of the Lord. Until thou art brought to this, O Christian, that thy mind becomes merely passive, and that thou purely sufferest the operation and will of God, it is evident, that God is impeded by thee, so that he cannot unite himself with thy soul."[53]

Forsaking our self-will and self-love frees us from torment and allows us to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps 34:8). We trust that the more we abandon ourselves and the world, the more we can know the riches of his glory. If we seek to commune with God in the stillness of prayer without first forsaking our own will, he will elude us. Contemplating God and denying self-will must advance together. Stilling the mind while the heart is still in bondage to the fallen creation may bring about violent emotion or hallucination, but not union with God.

"The soul that desires to enter into this inward way, must entirely resign and submit itself to all the dispensations of Providence, both inward and outward; must perfectly rest in God, and be content to be, as God shall appoint, poor or rich, cheerful or sad, peaceful or joyless. For thus the soul is cleansed from all created images that may crowd into it from without; and when thus stripped of all rational, sensible, and created things, and everything which is not God, she comes at last into her own ground and centre, and there with a pure eye discovers the essential light and presence of God. But before this treasure can be obtained, everything else must be forsaken."[54]

53 Johann Arndt. *True Christianity*. The Lutheran Book Store, Philadelphia, 1868. Page 183.

54 Ibid., page 388.

Earthly joy is only a faint indication of what awaits us in union with God, as there is a deeper contentment that is not altered by changes in our outward circumstances. Just as God's will underlies all of the contrasting vicissitudes of creation, so the contentment of the pure love of God (which comes after renouncing self-will) is present beneath all changing earthly emotions. It is a contentment that is present whether we are living through a time to weep or a time to laugh (Eccl 3:4), and it is the earnest of our inheritance, the foretaste of the final consummation.

12. THE SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE

"I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord...I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God."
(Hosea 2:19-20,23)

"Lord, you are my lover,
My longing,
My flowing stream,
My sun,
And I am your reflection."[55]

Lord Jesus, heavenly bridegroom, come into the chamber of my heart, break down the barren walls that kept you out, and make me into a flourishing garden, your place of pleasure and rest, a place of joyous feasting, full of new growth, full of incense and perfume, and full of new wine; make me a sealed garden, unspotted from the world; make your Holy Spirit come upon me, to blow and spread the sweet aroma of our fruits out into the world.

55 Mechthild of Magdeburg. *How the Soul Speaks to God*, in *Beguine Spirituality*. The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, 1990. Page 55.

Knowing the Bridegroom

Throughout the Scriptures, God's relationship with his people is described as a marriage, and the glorious life of the saints in eternity as a marriage feast. This is found in the Old Testament prophets (Hosea 2, Ezekiel 16), in the parables of the Gospels (Matt 22:1-14, Matt 25:1-13), in the Epistles (2 Cor 11:2, Eph 5:29-32), and above all in Revelation 19-22. Marriage is the most intimate of human relationships, and the one in which two individuals become one flesh. St. Paul describes this oneness of flesh as being a revelation of the mystery of Christ and his Church (Eph 5:31-32). Christ took on our human nature and he gives us his flesh and blood in the Eucharist in order that we might be one flesh with him.

Luther used this Biblical concept of our marriage with Christ to illustrate in a striking and lovely way the key Reformation doctrine of salvation by grace alone, describing our faith as the wedding-ring that binds us to our bridegroom:

"Faith not only gives the soul enough for her to become, like the divine word, gracious, free, and blessed. It also unites the soul with Christ, like a bride with the bridegroom, and, from this marriage, Christ and the soul become one body, as St. Paul says [Eph. 5:30]. Then the possessions of both are in common—whether fortune, misfortune, or anything else—so that what Christ has also belongs to the believing soul, and what the soul has will belong to Christ. If Christ has all good things, including blessedness, these will also belong to the soul. If the soul is full of trespasses and sins, these will belong to Christ. At this point a contest of happy exchanges takes place. Because Christ is God and man, and has never sinned, and because His sanctity is unconquerable, eternal and

almighty, He takes possession of the sins of the believing soul by virtue of her wedding-ring, namely faith, and acts just as if He had committed those sins Himself."[56]

This spiritual marriage is both a present reality (Christ is already our bridegroom) and also something that will be fully consummated in the eschaton. It is therefore both a comfort and an aspiration, and meditating upon our marriage to Christ can inspire us with the highest devotion. As marriage is the closest of human relationships, so the consummation of our spiritual marriage will be the closest possible union of the believer with his God. In reference to Revelation 3:20 where the divine communication is described as Christ entering into and supping with us, Johannes Gossner explains that such language points towards an experience of God that is itself beyond language:

"He has not been pleased to tell us wherein the supper consists; what enjoyments, what food he places before the soul;—and who will venture to describe that which is indescribable?—to utter that which is unutterable?—to measure what is infinite?...He, therefore, who would gladly be minutely informed what kind of a supper it is, must obtain the experience of it himself. Open unto him; so shalt thou soon enjoy and taste how precious, how excellent it is; and wilt then no longer desire to have a description of it, because thou wilt soon find that it is inexpressible."[57]

St. Paul similarly tells us that the joys of paradise consist of "unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter"

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56 Martin Luther, *The Freedom of the Christian*, quoted in *Theology of the Heart* by Bengt R. Hoffman. Kirk House Publishers, 1998. Page 118.

57 Johannes Gossner. *The Heavenly Visitant*. London: William MacIntosh, 1865. Page 63.

(2 Cor 12:4) and that the lovers of God will be rewarded with things that are beyond sight, hearing and human thought (1 Cor 2:9).

Given the ineffability of our divine bridegroom and the transcendent nature of the consummation of our spiritual marriage, when we will be united to the infinite God, it is fitting that the highest form of mystical prayer involves rising to a state of contemplation in which all creatures and mental images are silenced and banished from the heart. Only here can we begin to know our beloved as he truly is.

"Though our 'beloved' is always with us, yet he never discovers himself but when the heart is quiet and composed, and all the senses are collected in God. When nothing earthly appears in the understanding, but all its animal and worldly wisdom is swallowed up in faith; then the divine light arises, darting light and glory through the benighted soul. This is that darkness which is the habitation of God; that night, in which the will rests in union with the will of God; and in which the memory forgets all the impressions of the creatures. Then, in a moment, the divine light strikes the understanding, heavenly desires inflame the will, and eternal joys posses and fill the memory."[58]

This state is described alternately as both darkness and light, and when entering into this deep prayer it can fitly be said that we are overshadowed by a bright cloud (Matt 17:5). It is darkness because the senses, which are used to focusing on the external world, are cut off from their usual objects and are directed inwards; it is also darkness because God is beyond the power of our thought, and therefore we must depart from the

58 Johann Arndt. *True Christianity*. The Lutheran Book Store, Philadelphia, 1868. Pages 390-1.

mental light that we have commonly known. On the other hand this state is light in that here we are taken out of dark world of sin, uncertainty, and ignorance, and we come to perceive the everlasting truth.

Inner stillness is the great requirement for advancing towards this foretaste of our future consummation, and this is the reason for the repeated admonitions throughout this book to "enter into the inner Sabbath". This practice of entering into the inner rest prepares one for putting aside all words, thoughts and impressions. Here we must strive even to forget all memories of previous insights and revelations gained through prayer, for these memories are themselves thought impressions that can stand in the way of our higher union, and focusing on them will cause the reason to become active.

"All desire and movement must cease in order to taste that which is immobile and within."[59]

It is naturally difficult to explain in words what this struggle for silence can be like. Each attempt I have made to enter into this silence has been different, but they have all been fruitful; I have never come away without a blessing. Through perseverance, one comes to taste one's real self: a spirit created by God to worship him in spirit and in truth. In normal thought, we can rationally understand that we still struggle against many idols of the heart and mind, but in deep contemplation we come to feel these idols as burdens on the soul that must be removed, as poisonous growths that must be

59 Valentin Weigel. *On the Place of the World*, in *Valentin Weigel: Selected Spiritual Writings*. Paulist Press, 2003. Page 116.

rooted out if we are to join our heavenly bridegroom. These inner idols make up the mass of sin that is still bonded to us, the mass which we have always mistakenly thought to be our real self. Through prayer this knot of sin is found out, and once found out it is in retreat.

Humanistic rationalism assumes that the mind or soul can understand its own ways and guide its own existence. Even those who claim that man is controlled by the subconscious realm generally do so in order to excuse their own sin, and in the end they still tacitly accept that man is able to overcome his problems with his own strength. By contrast the Bible tells us, "Man's goings are of the Lord; how can a man then understand his own way?"(Prov 20:24). Thus to live in accordance with our design is to cease from trying to understand our own way apart from the revelation of God, to cease from willing apart from God's command, and, at certain times, to cease from all thought that originates with us. By ceasing from working, God works in us what we could never imagine. The psalmist declares, "a day in thy courts is better than a thousand"(Ps 84:10), and through entering into the spiritual temple that is within every believer, we can come to declare that a moment of silent contemplation of God is better than a thousand days of mortal life and all their pleasures.

The Song of Songs

Although the foretaste of our consummation is best known in inner silence, Scripture must be the starting point and essence of all Christian contemplation. I mentioned above some of the

key Scriptural passages that teach the spiritual marriage, but I omitted the Song of Songs (also known as Canticles). It is this book of the Bible that has held a special place for mystics throughout the centuries. Although framed as a love song between Solomon and his bride, the song has almost universally been understood as describing the love between Christ and his church. The book contains the highest expressions of love found anywhere in Scripture, and I pray that all the faithful can come to believe that God surely reserved such language to illustrate the principal teaching of his revelation to man—his love for the elect—, rather than simply to express human emotion. In his introduction to the Song of Songs, Matthew Henry, perhaps the most widely read and mainstream Protestant Bible commentator in the English-speaking world, wrote that the book,

"appears to be a very bright and powerful ray of heavenly light, admirably fitted to excite pious and devout affections in holy souls, to draw out their desires towards God, to increase their delight in him, and improve their acquaintance and communion with him. It is an allegory, the letter of which kills those who rest in that and look no further, but the spirit of which gives life, 2 Cor 3 6; John 6 63. It is a parable, which makes divine things more difficult to those who do not love them, but more plain and pleasant to those who do, Matt 13 14, 16. Experienced Christians here find a counterpart of their experiences, and to them it is intelligible, while those neither understand it nor relish it who have no part nor lot in the matter...When we apply ourselves to the study of this book we must not only, with Moses and Joshua, put off our shoe from off our foot, and even forget that we have bodies, because the place where we stand is holy ground, but we must, with John, come up hither, must spread our wings, take a noble flight, and soar upwards, till by faith and holy love we enter into the

holiest, for this is no other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven."[60]

By reading the Song of Songs as a description of divine love, we find therein the most fruitful Scripture passages to aid us in pressing on to the foretaste of our consummation.

"[I]n the bride chamber itself [is] where one learns to know one's bridegroom, Christ Jesus, in true inwardness and in proper joy and pleasure of the heart."[61]

We observed above (in Chapter 7) that there are inner spiritual senses that correspond to the bodily senses, and that this allows us to understand properly various passages of the Bible that set forth spiritual concepts using the language of sense perception. This concept is key to reading the Song of Songs. God has given us sensual desires and sensual pleasures so that we can know the intense craving that we should have for him and the total enjoyment that awaits us in union with our bridegroom.

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee. Draw me, we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee." (Song 1:2-4)

60 Matthew Henry. *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament: Old Testament Volume III.* Joseph Robinson, London, 1839. Page 1053.

61 August Hermann Francke. *The Foretaste of Eternal Life,* in *Pietists: Selected Writings*. Paulist Press, 1983. Page 156.

"A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts." (Song 1:13)

The name of the Lord is as ointment poured forth. At the sound of his name we remember all of the gifts that he has granted us, and it infuses its qualities into all of our surroundings and sweetens all of our perceptions. He draws us to himself, inspiring us to abandon all worldly pleasures in order to enter into his presence. There we will be rewarded with the joy of love; there we will be filled with the perfume of the Spirit in our very depths, resting in union with our God.

At the fall we were cursed with thorns, labor and death. We endure winters, droughts, failed harvests and various times of uncertainty and scarcity. Union with Christ is perpetual fruitfulness, perpetual Spring. Our bridegroom stands out as the truly fruitful human being within a race that can only bring forth destruction when using its own corrupted strength. We can rest in him and feast on his delights.

"As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste." (Song 2:3)

"My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." (Song 2:10-13)

We are called to leave behind our carnal existence, which only leads to death. In dying to the world, we sow a seed that will

grow to perfection. We are to go forth into the kingdom of light, the Spirit of God working in us to bring forth good fruit; enjoying the communion of saints, we take ever more pleasure in the good fruit brought forth in our brothers and sisters in the Lord. While still living in the world and subject to pain and corruption, our hearts already live in the coming age, together with our Lord and fellow members of his bride.

Christ's love for us is not grudging or reluctant, nor is it condescending or a distasteful burden on his part. He is intoxicated with love for his Church. We have been made pure and lovely by the blood of the atonement; Christ sees the Holy Spirit dwelling and working in us, and he is driven to rapture at the sight of the free gifts that have been bestowed on believers. He can love us completely and can genuinely delight in us because we have been truly cleansed.

"Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes." (Song 1:15)

"O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely." (Song 2:14)

"Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee." (Song 4:7)

"Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck. How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices! Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon. A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed...Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden,

that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits." (Song 4:9-12,16)

"Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me." (Song 6:5)

Christ yearns to hear our voice cry out in love to him. We are the most pleasing thing to him in all creation. When he comes to sup with us, we taste his delights and he tastes our delights. This mutual enjoyment and mutual indwelling is what God created us for. The bride declares,

"I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me." (Song 7:10)

The infinite uncreated Lord focuses his desire on me. The God who could raise up from the stones sinless worshippers to serve him instead chose to die on the Cross in order to take members of an utterly unclean race and make them clean.

"Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it." (Song 8:6-7)

We are sealed upon the heart of Christ, ever receiving the infinite effusion of his love, and we are sealed upon his arm, ever protected and guided by his infinite strength. The love that drove Christ to such extremes of selflessness and devotion is stronger than death, and this love has indeed trampled death under its feet, burning through all obstacles sent from the world, the flesh and the devil.

Love Within and Without

Given the focus within mysticism on the inner life, one can sometimes come across the objection that mysticism neglects the love of neighbor in favor of self-absorption. Any practice certainly can be abused, but mystical prayer, when properly understood, can only enhance our love of neighbor, for it is the same gracious love of God that works both the inner transformation of the soul and the destruction of all impediments to brotherly love. Indeed, because such impediments are within the individual, they can only be rooted out by searching within.

Christ himself spent many hours alone in prayer. It is not unreasonable to say that we ought to spend even more time in prayer. Christ prayed to his Father on behalf of others, and we ought to imitate him in this; but unlike Christ, we also need to pray for personal forgiveness. Our prayers of repentance are necessarily an internal matter, for we have sinned primarily against God, the cause of our sin is only within ourselves, and only through God acting within us can we be healed.

As we are purged of self-love we come to understand that the transcendent joy we feel in contemplation is itself only an effect of love, not love itself, and that if love demands that we lay aside this joy in order to serve our neighbor, we gladly do so.

"you must sometimes leave your state of exaltation for the sake of something better out of love and sometimes to perform an act of love where this is needed, either spiritually or physically...[E]ven if you are in such ecstasy as St Paul was, and knew of a sick person who asked for a bowl of soup from you, then I would consider it far better for you to leave your ecstasy for the sake of love and to administer to the needy person in a love that is greater."[62]

Although deep contemplative prayer does require forgetting and pushing away all memory of the creatures, the uncreated love that is shown us in these moments stays with us when we again turn our minds to our neighbors. The more fervently we seek the love of God in solitary prayer, the more the warmth of this love stays with us and governs our interactions with others. Our love for others loses its selfishness and fear of being judged, and becomes more conformed to the divine love. The anger and self-indignation that previously arose so quickly now finds less fuel, less ground in which to grow. If we fall into self-love, we feel the love of God that we have tasted in contemplation abandoning us; if we fervently love our neighbor, our sense of the love of God only increases. This increase is especially felt when we show love to our fellow saints. Here we can say that deep calls out to deep, for the infinite love of God dwelling in one Christian speaks to and pleases the same infinite love dwelling in another.

When first exploring mysticism, one might think that this approach requires constant concentration and mental effort. This misconception can be removed by coming to see that the

62 Meister Eckhart. *The Talks of Instruction*, in *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings.* Penguin Books 1994. Page 17.

goal of the mystical life is not a certain mental state but the cultivation of true love both within and without. It is through love that we are able to achieve the prayer of the heart, the only form of prayer that can be perpetual. We certainly pray with our mouths and with our reason, but both mouth and reason can grow tired of praying. But the prayer of the heart, which is love, can be perpetual because, as Johannes Kelpius remarks, "the heart is never weary of loving." Kelpius continues:

"This incessant prayer now consists in an everlasting inclination of the heart to God, which inclination flows from Love. This love draws the presence of God into us; so that, as by the operation of divine grace the love to God is generated in us, so is also the presence of grace increased by this love, that such prayer is performed in us, without us or our cogitation. It is the same as with a person living in the air and drawing it in with his breath without thinking that by it he lives and breathes, because he does not reflect upon it. Wherefore this is called a Mystical Way —that is, a secret and incomprehensible way. In one word, the prayer of the heart may be performed at all times, though the heart cannot think or speak at all times."[63]

Meister Eckhart expresses much the same idea when he warns against an approach to God that relies too much on mental images rather than the love of God in the heart.

"[The] real possession of God is to be found in the heart, in an inner motion of the spirit towards him and striving for him, not just in thinking about him always in the same way. For that would be beyond the capacity of our nature and would be very difficult to achieve and would not even be the best thing to do.

63 Johannes Kelpius. *The Method of Prayer*. The Kelpius Society, Philadelphia, 2007. Page 13.

We should not content ourselves with a God of thoughts for, when the thoughts come to an end, so too shall God. Rather, we should have a living God who is beyond the thoughts of all people and all creatures."[64]

When we live in true charity with our neighbors, we can be faithful to our heavenly bridegroom even when our reason is not currently fixed upon him. The love of neighbor that is pleasing to God cannot be achieved through our own strength, for this proper love of neighbor is itself a gift of God. Through this love for others that God works in us we are kept in the marriage bond that guarantees our passage out of death and darkness into the kingdom of light. When we enter the Sabbath peace to commune with our spiritual spouse, we focus directly on the love of God without any created intermediaries. This love engulfs the heart, so that nothing enters or leaves the heart without passing through it. When we are in this state, crosses and persecutions urge the heart to rely even more upon God, the perception of our own sin causes us to cling more firmly to the unmerited mercy that has been shown us, temporal blessings inspire more fervent prayers of thanksgiving, and words and thoughts originating in the heart serve to bless others. This trust in God is the faith that overcomes the world and this love for him is the love that casts out fear. These are the gifts to the saints promised in the word of God. May we not doubt these promises, and by God's grace let us be untiring in our pursuit of them.

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64 Meister Eckhart. *The Talks of Instruction*, in *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings.* Penguin Books, 1994. Page 10.

APPENDIX A:
PRIESTLY PRAYER OF DEDICATION

[While mysticism culminates in the wordless prayer of the heart, spoken prayer is still absolutely essential. I offer the following outline for prayer that has been very helpful in my life. This outline can be modified to fit each individual's situation. We should include anything that needs to be renounced, any crosses that the old man is rebelling against, as well as specific praises and prayers of thanksgiving.]

Lord God, as an anointed priest of the New Covenant, I offer myself up to you as a living sacrifice. All that I am, all that I have, is yours to do with as you wish. I offer up my life, my talents, my family, my spouse, my children, my earthly possessions. I renounce my will and desire, and I give all things into your hands. I freely accept and take up every cross sent by you. I take up the cross of physical infirmity, of financial uncertainty, of the loss of loved ones, of living under an unjust government, and of persecution. I offer up the old man as a wicked, accursed thing to be burnt up and destroyed. I put on the garments of praise, and I offer the sacrifices of thanksgiving, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Lord have mercy on me a sinner, Amen.

APPENDIX B:
MORTIFICATION OF THE FLESH

"When ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."
(Matthew 6:16-18)

Throughout this book I have focused on the inner denial of self-will through the operation of the Holy Spirit. This inner mortification is distinct from bodily self-denial and asceticism, but external exercises, especially fasting, can certainly aid our inner transformation.

Although the New Testament does not contain any specific commands about fasting, it does assume that Christians will fast and, most importantly, Christ promises that those who fast in the proper manner will be rewarded. It is folly for Christians to neglect a practice that is so simple and so certain to bring a reward from God.

Unfortunately, as the spirit of antichrist began to work in the Church, the salutary exercise of fasting became subject to legalistic and pharisaical regulation. Against the clear warning and condemnation of St. Paul in Colossians 2, the leaders of the Church judged men in food and drink and in holy days, and

they developed elaborate rules of "touch not, taste not". Fasting was exulted to such a degree amongst certain of the monks, that the very act of eating was despised as carnal and unclean, although Christ neither taught nor demonstrated any such thing during his earthly ministry.

Our Reformation fathers corrected these errors, while still commending the proper use of fasting. From the Augsburg Confession:

"Here our adversaries object that our teachers are opposed to discipline and mortification of the flesh, as Jovinian. But the contrary may be learned from the writings of our teachers. For they have always taught concerning the cross that it behooves Christians to bear afflictions. This is the true, earnest, and unfeigned mortification, to wit, to be exercised with divers afflictions, and to be crucified with Christ.

Moreover, they teach that every Christian ought to train and subdue himself with bodily restraints, or bodily exercises and labors that neither satiety nor slothfulness tempt him to sin, but not that we may merit grace or make satisfaction for sins by such exercises. And such external discipline ought to be urged at all times, not only on a few and set days. So Christ commands, Luke 21:34: Take heed lest your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting; also Matt. 17:21: This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting. Paul also says, 1 Cor. 9:27: I keep under my body and bring it into subjection. Here he clearly shows that he was keeping under his body, not to merit forgiveness of sins by that discipline, but to have his body in subjection and fitted for spiritual things, and for the discharge of duty according to his calling. Therefore, we do not condemn fasting in itself, but the traditions which prescribe certain days and certain meats, with peril of conscience, as though such works were a necessary service." (*The Augsburg Confession*, Article XXVI. Of the Distinction of Meats)

We can use this passage from our confession to direct our own use of fasting and bodily self-denial and to learn how such

practices can aid us in mystical prayer. As we strive for an ever deeper awareness of God, sin becomes more odious and more disruptive. Uttering an unkind word, having an unloving thought, or overindulging in any bodily pleasure can disrupt our communion with God. Fasting helps us to "train and subdue" ourselves and thereby avoid certain temptations to sin, and it allows us to keep our "body in subjection and fitted for spiritual things". Through temporarily denying the desires of the body, even the sinless desire for wholesome nourishment, the body becomes accustomed to obeying the spirit, rather than directing it. Thus the body will more readily yield to rebuke when it attempts to draw the spirit to an unlawful desire.

As the Confession notes, Christians must constantly practice self-control and moderation of bodily desire. Special periods of fasting and abstinence are a private, individual matter. As long as fasting does not lead to spiritual pride or despising the good gifts of God, it should be used regularly by all who seek to draw close to the Lord.

APPENDIX C:

LUTHER ON SPIRIT, SOUL AND BODY

[The following passage is taken from Martin Luther's *An Exposition upon the Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary called Magnificat*[65]. Although Luther is not here discussing mystical theology, his anthropological analysis is relevant to the material covered in Chapter 2 of this book.

Starting from the prayer of St. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Luther explains that man is composed of a spirit, soul and body. The spirit is where faith and supernatural wisdom are placed by God, the soul is the seat of reason, and the body of course is the part of us that can be seen and felt by others. Luther also notes that this threefold division is different from the antithesis found in the Bible between the spirit and the flesh. This latter distinction is used to designate whether a man is living in obedience to God (the spirit) or in obedience to our fallen sinful nature (the flesh). Thus when a man is thinking sinful thoughts, his mind can be said to be "carnal", although by nature the mind is distinct from the body.

By showing that saving faith resides in the spirit, which is beyond reason, Luther provides a helpful image for us to use in mystical prayer. It is in the darkness of the spirit, the holy of holies in the human being, where the feeble light of reason does not shine, that we are able to know God. When the spirit or heart of a Christian is not weighed down by material sense impressions and worldly thoughts, God illuminates us.]

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65 *An exposicion vpon the songe of the blessed virgine Mary, called Magnificat Where vnto are added the songes of Salue regina, Benedictus and Nu[n]c dimittis*. Translated out of latine into Englysh by Ihon Hollybush. Luther, Martin, 1483-1546., Coverdale, Miles, 1488-1568. [Southwark: J. Nicholson], 1538.
(http://name.umdl.umich.edu/a68425.0001.001)
[Spelling modernized by author]

Scripture dealeth man in three parts, as Paul the First to the Tessalonians the last chapter sayeth: "The very God of peace, sanctify you throughout. And I pray God that your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless unto the coming of our LORD." And every one of these three, with all the man, is again dealt another way in two, namely: the flesh, and the spirit. The which partition is not of the nature, but of the being or properness. That is to say: Nature hath three parts, namely: the spirit, the soul, and the body, and all three may altogether, be ether good or bad, and is then called the spirit and the flesh, whereof we will not speak at this time.

The first part (that is) the spirit, is the most excellent, the deepest and the most noble part of man, wherewith he is apt to understand incomprehensible, invisible and eternal things: and to be short, it is the house wherein faith and the word of God are contained, whereof David speaketh: "Lord renew a right spirit within me"(Ps 51:10), that is, a straight and not bowed faith. And again speaking of the unfaithful, he sayeth: "a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not stedfast with God"(Ps 78:8).

The second part, the soul; is even the same spirit after the nature, but after another operation. Namely, in that it quickeneth the body and worketh by the same, and is oftentimes taken in scripture for life. For the spirit may live well enough without the body, but so may not the body. This part see we also that even as we sleep it doth live and work without any ceasing. And his condition or property is not to perceive things that be incomprehensible, but such, as reason can have

knowledge of and measure: And reason is the chief light in this house. Yea without the spirit being lightened with faith, or a greater light do rule and guide this light of reason, it cannot be without error: for it is too vile, to bear any swing in godly business. Unto these two parts doth Scripture attribute much: but chiefly wisdom and knowledge: wisdom unto the spirit, and knowledge unto the soul. Besides these attributeth it also, hate, love, pleasure, loathsomeness, and such like.

The third is the body with his members, whose works are mere exercise and use of such things as the soul knoweth, and the spirit doth believe. And to confirm this by a witness of the Scripture: Moses made a Tabernacle with a threefold and several mansion. The first was called sanctum sanctorum, in the which God dwelt, and this had no light. The second was called sanctum, wherein was the candlestick with the seven shafts and lamps. The third was called the forecourt, which was under the open sky, and bare to the sun beams. In this figure is every Christen man fitly described: For his spirit is the sanctum sanctorum, that is, the most holy, the dwelling of God in a secret and, as a man might say, in a dark faith: for he believeth it yet he cannot perceive with his eyesight, neither feeleth, nor yet doth comprehend. The soul is the sanctum, (that is the holy), there be the seven lamps, that is, all manner of understanding, the difference and knowledge of corporal and visible things. The body is the forecourt, which is bare to every man, so that they may see what he doth, and how he liveth.

Therefore now prayeth Paul and sayeth: The very God of peace sanctify you throughout. Not only in one part; but throughout, that the spirit, soul, body, and altogether be

holy...If the spirit be not holy, there shall nothing else be holy. Then is the most jeopardy and business in the holiness of the spirit, which consisteth only in a pure faith: that is, if the spirit be not cumbered with comprehensible things, as it is said.